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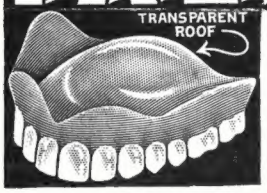

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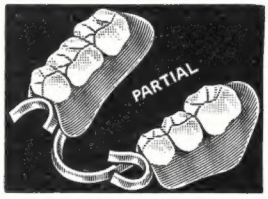

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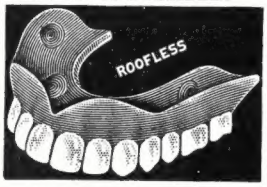

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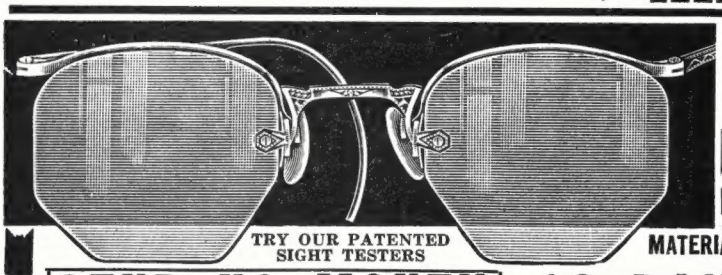

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Volume 2 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Number 2

WESTERN YARNS

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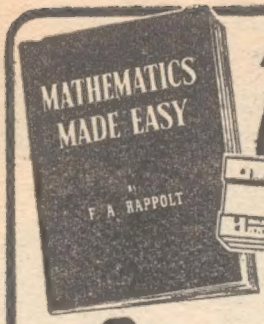

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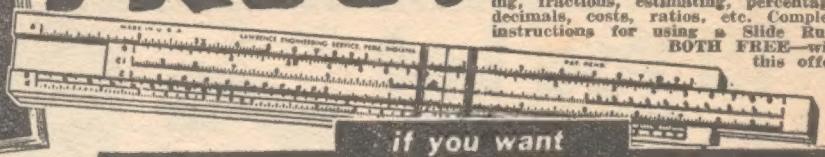

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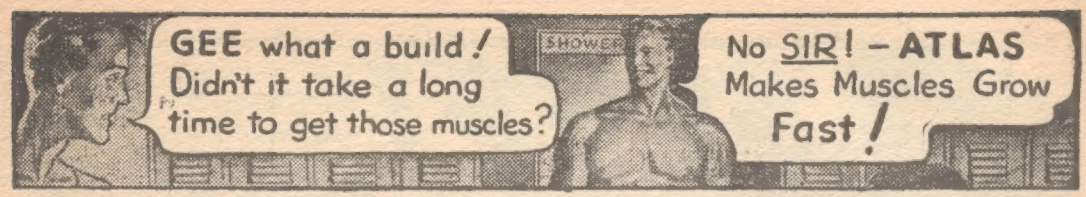

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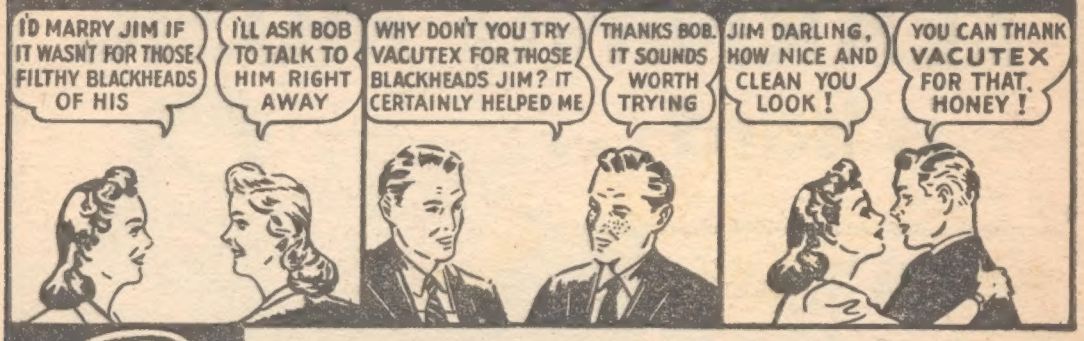

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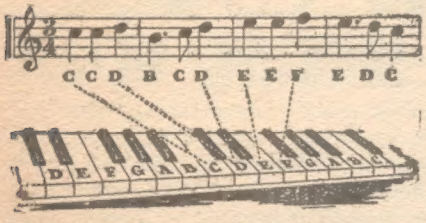

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GUNS OF TOMAHAWK RANGE

A Suspenseful Western Novel

By GEORGE H. WELDON

The brief lightning flare died away, then Garrity's guns roared in the darkness.

HE WAS short and fat with a pug nose almost buried from sight between two hog-fat cheeks that quivered as he talked. Two baby blue eyes, frosty now, stared hard at Les Lockwood. The crispness in the big man's voice matched his eyes, nettled the young puncher who stood facing him.

Les Lockwood hunched his wide powerful shoulders. He flipped the half dollar lucky piece to and fro in his lean hands, watched Big Ben start losing his temper. Big Ben Bergston and trouble on Tomahawk

Les Lockwood knew that Big Ben Bergston meant to have Tomahawk Range at any cost —that the law demanded he turn it over in default of his debts. But Lockwood had been trying too hard to settle down and break with his former life to give up without a struggle now—even a hopeless one like this which could land him only in Boothill!

range were the devil's saddlemates. He hooked his thumbs under the edge of his brass-studded gunbelt, leaned back with wary eyes on the grossly fat man and his slash mouthed, slant-jawed partner, Hank Thomas, a rail-thin gunnie who sat easily in the saddle. He kept his mouth shut and his pale eyes open.

Air lay still and unmoving over the seared pasture of Tomahawk range. Beyond the ranch-house, Silver Creek gave forth a glint of water, its course marked by cotton-

woods, leaves still in the heat. A few cattle moved lazily about.

He swept his eyes from Big Ben Bergston and his deadly gun partner to where black thunderheads were piled up against the peak of old Whitecap. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bergston switch his glance.

"Thunder building up," Big Ben changed his tone of voice to one of indolence. Too indolent, thought Les Lockwood.

He kept his eyes on the promise of rain. It might be to late to save a lot of pasture but his own tiny outfit, watered by Silver Creek would bear a good crop of hay with another rain. Bitterness drew down the corners of his mouth, aged his face. Hay was all he could expect this year from his Slash J. Most of the cattle his skinny roll of money had purchased had disappeared—and now Bergston, land-grabbing kingpin of Tomahawk range—owner of the Cross Bar ranch, partner in the local bank and potential candidate for the territorial legislature, had come back to nag him again.

"Well," Big Ben drawled good naturedly, "I moseyed over to see if you've changed your mind." He waited, twitching imaginary specks of dust from his neat tie.

Les Lockwood fidgeted. He was flat broke—almost and he knew that Big Ben knew it. He had his own idea of what had happened to his small herd of beef, but suspicions and proof were two different things. He had one slim chance to pull through—to make a success in this one thing. Brief memories of his dark past made him whip about. He stiffened, involuntarily and of its own accord his gun hand dropped lower, almost touched the bone-handled butt of his single Colt. He saw Hank Thomas' eyes widen a bit. Curse himself. Thomas, a gunman, was quick to recognize another of his kin. He forced himself to pull the makings from his shirt pocket.

"What's your game?" Harshness swept into his mild voice that he had made Tomahawk range accept as his own. He might as well get the ugly news now as later.

Bergston had pulled a boner letting an outsider horn in here on the Slash J that lay like a long finger of land between his two holdings on either side and ran all the way up into the rough hilly country at the base of old Whitecap. Even now, his one hand, Old Jake was up that way trying to find a few mossyhorns and chouse them out.

He grinned as he thought of Old Jake. Tied up with rheumatism the old-timer's one passion was to play faro and other games of chance down at the Lucky Star Saloon, owned by Big Ben Bergston. Sometimes he wondered how Jake managed it on the slim wages he drew here on the Slash J.

Bergston's voice cut through, snapped him back to attention.

"It'd be to your profit," he said, good nature radiating from his fat face. He stabbed with a thick black cigar, "Save having Sheriff Grey serve papers on you." He waited expectantly, sure of himself.

Les Lockwood felt the chill winds of danger at his back. The same chill winds that had led him into and out of the shadows of the noose. His face tightened as it always had when he'd faced danger on the lonely trails of the owlhoot that he'd forsaken to turn rancher.

"I ordered you to keep off of the Slash J," his voice made the fat man jerk to attention, "and then most of my cattle were run off." He stepped back, eyes fastened on the two men.

Hank Thomas swore, "Th' young whelp needs gun whippin'!" His clawed hand's fingers clenched and unclenched on the butt of his gun.

Les Lockwood laughed. He could see Big Ben's face redden, then turn pale. The big man had figured that he'd be fast enough to crawl—yet why did Bergston raise such hell over a few acres? He jabbed again.

"You should have bought it from the Colonel," he said, "before he had a chance to sell out to me."

BERGSTON'S blue eyes became as cold as the wind that swept over Tomahawk range in the dead of winter. His fat lips pursed, "The Colonel and me," he hesitated, "weren't exactly friends. Selling out to a stranger was his idea of getting ahead of me."

His tone changed abruptly. "Quit being a stubborn fool, Lockwood. This ranch'll fill out my holdings." He waited, then added, "Up here folks generally hop when I tell them."

Les Lockwood shrugged his wide, sloping shoulders, felt the weight of his gun on his lean hip.

"I'm not the hopping kind," he snapped back, "and you can turn your curly wolves loose any time." He stared at the hawk-faced, slit-mouthed gunman who sided Bergston.

All pretense of good nature left the huge face. Big Ben spat on the ground, "You're mule headed, Lockwood." He jabbed with a fat forefinger at the rocky barren ground at the east end of the Slash J. "Half your outfit's nothing but mesquite and rocks. Colonel Landley was just hanging on by the skin of his teeth, waiting for a sucker to unload on and spite me." He waited, bright eyes flickered about.

"Reckon with you next to the Slash J, all a man can do is to hang on," Les grated harshly. This was fighting talk and he knew it, "Ever since I found two of my cows sporting a Cross Bar brand I read the sign right." He caught his breath, controlled the surge of red anger, "You can't rawhide me into selling, Ben."

He added: "I don't savvy what your game is, but it's something more than a few acres of ground." He said the last with the grim finality of a .44 slug.

Big Ben looked surprised. His big soft belly quivered. His mouth opened then shut fast.

Les Lockwood looked at old Whitecap far in the distance. Black clouds hid the base of the mountain. Flashes of lightning split the darkness. Air, cool now, with hints of rain, rustled the dry leaves on the cottonwood.

He watched Big Ben's fat-wrinkled face tighten until the flesh was taut and smooth. Bergston was changing him, driving him back into the clouded past he'd tried to leave behind him. For a long moment Big Ben said nothing. He just sat slouched over in his saddle. Hank Thomas sidled a bit to one side, his dark hatchet-sharp face impassive. Thunderclaps sounded from the east.

"I think you'll change your mind about selling," Big Ben's voice was flat and impersonal. His saddle creaked under his weight.

Les Lockwood stepped back, kept Hank Thomas in sight. He said flatly, "It'll be a cold day in July." He snapped the words out harshly.

Bergston laughed nastily. "I know you're an ex-jailbird, Lockwood." He let it sink in, "Course I'm not the man to hold a gent's past against him." He rolled the cigar about in his hands.

The half dollar felt cold suddenly to Les Lockwood. He stopped flipping it, shoved it into his pocket. "I served full time," he grated.

Big Ben waved his hand airily. "Too many things been happening here, Lockwood." He moved closer to Hank Thomas, "More things happening might cause our law here to check up on you."

"Get off!" Les Lockwood snarled. He stepped forward toward Big Ben Bergston. Gone now was all effort at restraint. Bergston had removed the need for pretense. This was an affair of guns and lead if need be. Then he cursed softly. The edgy nerves gained on the thin line between life and death on the dark trails were dulled now by the struggle against bills and routine ranch chores. He'd forgot that Hank Thomas wasn't an ordinary puncher.

Big Ben Bergston yelped to Hank. Les dove straight at the big man, gun hand slapping the butt of his holstered Colt. He played his ace wild. Hank Thomas' hand blurred with the speed of a draw famed along the border country. Big Ben screamed hoarsely.

Les saw his gunsight disappear in the fat man's belly. He grinned, felt his lips go dry as they always had in the past when the lure of guns held sway. Bergston's ruddy face lost all color, went as white as a bald-faced yearling's.

"Don't, Hank!" he squalled, "for God's sake!"

Beads of sweat ran down his tiny nose, dripped onto his chin, dribbled onto his trembling chest. Underneath his blue shirt his belly jumped with tremors.

"One move and Big Ben gets it," Les echoed the shaken voice of the kingpin. "I'm not pulling a windy."

"This hellion'll do it," squealed Big Ben. Fear made his fat hands tremble as if with the fever.

Hank Thomas said nothing. His gun socked back into his holster. His hands gripped his saddlehorn. Finally he said, "Sometime, puncher, there'll be nobody to say stop!"

LES LOCKWOOD backed away from the trembling man. All the pent-up emotion that had driven him for years broke loose. He was through running. Once he'd found every honest man's hand turned against him. His friends had been men of the outlaw trails. He'd promised himself

one chance—and this, Tomahawk range, was it.

"I'll be buried here, Ben," he said, "before I'll sell an acre of Slash J."

Bergston said nothing. He backed away, face ashen but hate danced in his blue eyes. Hank Thomas snarled, "We ain't buyin' now, Lockwood. We'll be buryin'."

Gusts of wind brought fine drops of rain. His stomach freed from the hard muzzle of the .44, Big Ben Bergston found his voice again. It was almost normal as he said:

"You called the game, Lockwood. I'm dealing the hand."

He squared the big shoulders, rode down the trail flanked by his partner Hank Thomas.

Les Lockwood sobered up. Driving Bergston and his ace gunnie off hadn't solved the problem that faced him, had added to his worries. He had only enough cash on hand to carry him for another two weeks. Bergston might be able to get the Slash J without gunplay. He'd expected to have enough of a herd to sell to meet the money due on his note in full. Now all he could hope to do was to sell enough hay from his watered pasture land to the small ranchers in the valley for enough money to take the place of his cattle.

Bergston, he figured, must have gotten wind of his purchase of the mower and greedy had tried to buy him off—then scare him off.

He frowned. Things didn't add up right. It wasn't necessary that Big Ben own the Slash J. It was even more of a puzzle that he'd try to start a fight even with a lone shoe string rancher over a few acres. Bergston's angle that he just wanted to fill out his holdings didn't satisfy. He shrugged his shoulders. Thunder roared.

Rain drove hard. Bergston and his tight-mouthed partner had been gone for hours. He stood on the porch of the ranchhouse, soaked up the coolness that rain had brought with the night. Overhead lightning forked across the sky with fingered hands of explosive white. Drops of water beat a tattoo on the roof. Jake was overdue.

Nothing made sense. People who'd egged him into bucking against the roaring bully years ago had backed out on him after his conviction. Angrily he punched the fire up in the range, stirred about rustling up food. Here on Tomahawk range Les Lockwood, embittered gunslinger had died. He poured water into the coffee pot. Here in Tomahawk range, Les Lockwood, small time hardup rancher might die too.

Pitch darkness held sway outside except for the shafts of lightning. Rain lessened, changed from solid sheets of water to a fine penetrating drizzle that made him feel better. Not much run off from a drizzle. Hard-baked earth would soak it up before it could run. Coffee smelled strong in the house.

Old Jake, his rheumatism-crippled old-timer who'd stuck with the place after he'd bought it, should have pulled in before now. Jake, he couldn't figure out. The old coot kept to himself except for regular visits to the Lucky Star in town. He frowned, thinking of the Lucky Star. Bergston owned the saloon and gambling joint too. How Jake managed to get money to gamble with on the wages that he was able to pay was one of the minor puzzles that he'd quit bothering about. Jake kept his mouth shut, did his work, and gambled. All he could ask for from any puncher was to do his work.

He rose, went to the door. Old Jake hadn't missed many meals. He shrugged his shoulders, felt silly. The afternoon visit of Ben Bergston and Hank Thomas had upset his whole day, made him jumpy. No sign of life showed outside. He pushed Jake out of his mind. The old-timer had probably holed up somewheres waiting for the rain to peter out.

Lightning crashed, lit up the room. Lightning cracked again, sharp, rifle edged. Glass tinkled as the lamp chimney shattered. Even before the glass finished rattling he jumped for the shelter of the wall. Two more rifle shots split the lull between thunderclaps.

The next flare of lightning caught him with the door opened. Cottonwoods, bent before the wind and rain glistened on Silver Creek's banks. Orange colored flame belched from the darkness at the base of the trees. A horse screamed. He jumped from the porch. That shot hadn't been at him.

CRYSTAL clear the setup flashed before him. Down by Silver Creek somebody was getting ambushed. He triggered two quick shots, ran fast, trying to cover the open ground before lightning would give the unknown rifleman a light-marked target. It was awkward going in his high-heeled boots. Once his spurs caught in the tangled grass, sent him sprawl-

ing. Halfway there he heard the fast tattoo of a hard-driven horse making a break from the far side of the cottonwoods. He drove lead at the dark blot, cursed as his running made his shots go wild. Lead hammered across his shoulder, scraped his collar bone.

He was in the trees now, breath coming hard, gun-filled right hand jutting in front of him. Silver Creek, swollen now, roaring noisily laid between him and the man who'd fled.

He came to a standstill, eyes tried to pick out the ground. His boots sank into the mud of the ford. Cold rain trickled down his neck, soaked him to the skin. Again lightning lit the crossing. He saw it then, half hidden on the far bank, black slicker gleaming.

It was Jake; his breath came in great racking sobs that shook his withered frame. Les pulled the slicker back, let it drop quickly. He could do nothing. Jake had been drilled squarely through the chest. Another slug had ripped his leg. Weak, unable to speak, his gnarled hands fumbled in his pockets.

Les Lockwood bent low, picked up the greyed head. Terrible blinding anger swept him. He had another reason for sticking it out now. Jake's voice fought, made words come, "In muh pocket," he tried hard, "intendin' to tell yuh—somebody laid—"

Les let the body sink back. Jake's weakness for gambling would have to be filled at the end of the trail. He searched the pockets, came up with a wet, torn piece of paper, shoved it inside his shirt pocket.

He whistled. Tied about Jake's scrawny neck was a fat little bag whose spilled contents in the palm of his hands showed bold specks of raw gold.

Sack jammed into his pocket, he tried to pick up the trail of the drygulcher. Rain had washed out anything that might have given a hint. His collar bone was raked raw, leaked blood stained his shirt. The law would have to be called in on this. Instinctively he flinched.

Some ruthless killer would pay in gunsmoke and hate-driven lead for the butchering of old Jake. He slid his Colt back into his holster. Dawn wasn't far away. In a few hours it would be daylight and Sheriff Grey might be able to strike the murderers' trail.

He was in the barn saddling up when he heard the clop of riders. Rain had left the ground soft and moist; here and there puddles of mud studded the corral.

Les Lockwood stiffened. Big Ben Bergston was headed in from the road. Sheriff Sam Grey, easily spotted on his big gelding, rode beside the Cross Bar man. Hank Thomas was nowhere in sight. Again came the old urge—to run from the lawman. He fought hard, felt his hair at the back of his neck grow cold from sudden sweat. His fingers found the half dollar, flipped it to and fro.

He finished tightening the cinch, led his horse from the barn. Bergstron's mouth moved but the words failed to carry. Grey, a big, well-built man with steely grey eyes that matched the iron streaks in his hair jogged ahead of his posse. There could be no mistake here. They were all heeled for trouble, faces hard.

Grey came straight to the point. Les stood silent while the lawman looked him over. His clothes were still wet from the soaking he'd taken last night. He'd been too excited to change clothes. His horse had been out a bit, was still damp.

"Ready to run for it?" Grey asked. He snapped an order, "Art, you and Clem search the house."

"Why the war party?" Les moved out, felt the ache of his collar bone. "Fact is," he added, "I was just fixing to head in for you?"

Bergston laughed. Back of him a pasty-faced, red-nosed gunhawk guffawed. Les felt his face whiten. He was in another tight spot here for some reason. Bergston was proof enough of that.

"Thanks," Grey's voice was dry, his eyes suspicious, "reckon you just missed me last night." He waited a moment.

Les half opened his mouth. Grey jumped in fast. "Where's old Jake?" Grey, Les noted, never gave a man time to answer his questions before cutting in fast with another one. His gun fingers itched. He'd seen necktie parties before. Reason swept back to him, stayed his pull. He asked,

"What the Sam Hill is this?"

BERGSTON came up alongside Grey. His blue eyes darted about the place. "Tell him, Grey," he snarled, "maybe he hasn't heard about it yet."

Grey flushed a bit. He owed his election to Big Ben's influence and was coming up for reelection.

Les jumped in, prodded him, "Better do as Ben says," he moved nervously, "or you'll lose a few votes."

"Tomahawk bank was robbed last night." Grey dropped his hand to his gunbutt. "Got an eye witness who swears it was you. Claims to have winged old Jake who was acting as lookout man." He stared hard. Les Lockwood flinched.

"And kind of looks like he touched you with lead," Grey added, "according to the blood on your shirt."

The whole thing stood clear now. Les eyed the bunch of riders. Most of them he knew, and well. Except for Big Ben and his wolf, Garrity, the gent who'd hoorawed so loudly, they were simply men riding posse.

"Jake," he answered, "is lying alongside Silver Creek, chopped down by a dirty drygulcher."

Grey looked a bit surprised. Les kept his eyes on the lawman, spun his yarn in jolting words. He didn't need to hear their words. Grey's look, Bergston's sneer, the utter disbelief mirrored on the tanned faces of the posse spoke for them. His face fell. He'd shot his bolt and failed. The half dollar fell in one hand. He held it tight, then slid it into his pocket. Jake's little sack of nuggets felt solid and he jerked his hand out again.

Big Ben's blue eyes were wide, the pupils black pin points of hate.

Grey laughed in his face. "Quite a yarn." He grated, "We'll check on Jake's body. The old fellow must have been as tough as a mountain goat to carry a slug this far before cashing in."

"You coming peaceful—or—" Grey asked. His face was as harsh as sunbaked desert.

"Bergston's riding me," Les fought for time, tried to make the swirling mess come to a sharp focus. He knew it sounded babyish.

"Bluffing!" Bergston said. Les relaxed. Big Ben had started talking. Some faint pattern of the setup began to clear through the mist. Bergston, instead of laughing his charge off, was fighting it.

He might gunsmoke his way out of this noose party rigged for himself. He backed up until the wall of the barn was at his back.

"Lockwood and myself had an argument yesterday like he says," admitted Bergston.

Les had to admire the man's colossal nerve. Grey cocked his head to one side.

"He got touchy when I tried to explain to him how he'd be better off selling to me than losing everything through a mortgage. Threatened me."

"Keep talking," snapped Les. "It sounds like a man running for office."

Grey flushed. Bergston jabbed the air with his cigar to emphasize. He caught his breath, Garrity, his gunman, moved out to one side, flanked him. The move wasn't lost by Lockwood who eased along, kept the nervous-acting gunhawk in front of him.

"Lockwood told me he'd pay me in one lump sum," Bergston lied easily. "Course I didn't believe him or figure he'd rob the bank."

Bleak faced, Garrity cut in. His slit of a mouth barely moved as he muttered, "And I jumped this jasper with his crowbait partner getting away from the bank." He spat tobacco on the ground. "Th' storm was bad, threw my aim off."

"Liar!" Les Lockwood flung the guncall out cold-bloodedly. Again he was the hunted man, life depending on the merest fraction of time, the wink of an eyelash, the flashing drive in another man's eyes that would drive him for his six-gun. They had him cold in this frameup, would send him either to the noose or to the prison. Bitter, ugly resentment flared.

Garrity's draw stopped. Surprise froze his pock-marked face. No slough of a gunman himself, he let his half-drawn gun slide back. Les Lockwood felt the cool butt of his gun in his hand.

"Don't be a fool!" Grey ordered.

Bergston said, "Grey's right, Lockwood. You'll get a fair trial. Big Ben will see to that."

"I can get in a couple of shots," Les touched the reins of his horse. He had one chance for a break. Once in jail he'd be lost. Bergston had overreached himself, tipped his hand. Old Jake's secret hadn't been so secret after all.

Only one thing out of place in the puzzle. Beefing Jake wouldn't help anybody find where his strike had been.

Grey gurgled with rage, his clean-cut face became purple. He fought for words as Big Ben spoke, "You'll be cut down like a lobo wolf, Lockwood."

Les kept backing up. Big Ben was putting on a good show. Every man jack there could swear that Ben had tried to talk him out of taking the lone-handed way out. "Your figgering," he kept edging for the

corner of the barn, "is wrong, Ben. I was going to use the same way Jake used."

He watched Big Ben's eyes widen for an instant. His shot in tne dark had told. Bergston had his nose on the scene of Jake's secret strike.

Grey's men surged forward as he reached the corner of the barn. Another step and he'd be out of sight from the posse. He held his fire, watched them weigh their chances. Bergston swung over, partly hid Garrity. Les saw the half-veiled move. Coldly, deliberately his right-hand gun bucked. Bergston's hat jerked, slid half off his head. He blurted out:

"Garrity!"

"You're hanging yourself," warned Grey but he kept his hand away from his gun-hipped thigh.

BERGSTON'S tongue flickered out. His face the color of dried putty twitched. Finally he stammered, "You'll get a fair trial Les."

"You said that before," Les felt the sharp corner of the barn at his back. He kept the fidgeting bunch of flint-faced riders under the muzzle of his Colt. Behind him he half caught the blur of motion, tried to jerk to one side. Even as he felt the crushing shock of a gun barrel biting into his head he realized what had happened; the men Gray had sent into the house had circled about.

Thunder clapped inside his skull while vivid bolts of lightning flashed before his eyes. His legs felt soft and weak, lengths of wet rope that refused to support the weight of his body any longer. Lances of pain jabbed into his brain—posse, barnyard and all wavered together. Mud spattered into his face.

* * *

Crisscrossed shadows fell across his bunk. In front of him iron bars separated his cell from the outer office of the sheriff. He sat on the end of his bunk, lighted a quirly, let the smoke idle from his square-tipped nose. He was in a tight sure enough this time. His head ached from the blows Grey's deputies had given him. That had been an entire day ago. Now it was midafternoon Jake had been buried. In the office he could see Grey cat-napping, sunlight bringing into bold relief his fine features.

Footsteps sounded outside. Big Ben Bergston entered the jail; for all his fat, the huge man walked as lightly as a mountain goat. Grey jerked erect, looked sheepish. Les grinned sourly. Grey had been caught asleep. He grunted. Behind Bergston came the sharp-featured, ratty-eyed gunman, Garrity.

"You mosey on," Ben ordered rat-face.

Grey asked, "What's up, Ben?"

Bergston laughed heartily. He pulled out a cigar, offered the sheriff one, bit the end off of one, puffed slowly before answering. "Just came to see Lockwood."

Uncertainty showed in Grey's face. Lockwood watched, narrow eyed. He egged the lawman on, "Jump, Sam, here's your owner."

Grey's face crimsoned. He heeled about suddenly. "You'll sing a different tune, cocky, when the law gets through with you."

"Take it easy," Ben Bergston grunted. "You rile too dang easy, Sam. Rawhiding never hurt anybody."

"I want to see Lockwood alone," Bergston said. "You can wait outside, Sam."

Sam Grey hesitated. Les Lockwood laughed again. He watched Grey move outside the calaboose door. Bergston came toward him. Lockwood's hands itched. He reached into his pocket, found the half dollar, started flipping it. Something was afoot or Big Ben wouldn't be making any kind of a play.

"Well," he said, "see you're wearing a new hat, Ben."

Bergston didn't flinch. Lockwood had to admire the man's enormous conceit and self-confidence. The owner of the Cross Bar waited a second. He shook his head.

"I'm playing fair, Lockwood. You're in a good way to swing." He paused.

"Keep talking," grated Les. He rubbed the butt of his quirly underneath his feet.

Big Ben sighed, breath wheezed through his small nose. He looked sat. "Grey's men found money taken from the bank in your house. Not even a smart lawyer can talk you out of it—not with your record."

"I'm not hung yet." Vivid hate surged in Les Lockwood's voice. Bitterness hardened his face. "And until I am, Bergston, you're on my list."

He watched Big Ben. Bergston waved his fat hand, brushed the threat aside but his tone grew sibilant. He glanced about; Grey had moved down the street.

"Your life for Jake's strike," he looked about again, "and it's a deal."

"What is?" Lockwood bluffed. He read this play right. Ben would gut him as soon as he was through with him.

He watched the play of emotions on Bergston's florid face. Bergston changed from a good-natured man with mercy for his fellowmen to his real role; that of a greedy hog. Things began to add up—add up to trouble. Bergston's grin became a knowing leer. He blinked one eye, tiptoed to the jail door and peered out. Satisfied he came back.

"Figured you for more than just a hare-brained rancher," he gloated. "There's plenty for both of us."

"NOW we can get to business." The man's callousness shocked Les, used as he was to the hard choices of the outlaw. Bergston played with lives and destinies as other men played with cards. His conceit was monstrous.

"Not yet," Les said warily. "Just where do I come in on this?"

"Garrity," answered Bergston, "is the only eyewitness against you." He looked about again. "And I can arrange for him to disappear."

"Which same isn't enough," countered Les. "How about the money planted in my ranch house?"

He saw Bergston wince slightly. "Since when can money disappear that everybody saw come out of the Slash J?"

"Easy," Bergston replied. "Since I own most of the bank I won't make a complaint. Grey won't be willing to buck my influence and after a while the whole thing can be dropped or a smart lawyer can get you cleared." He mopped the sweat off his brow, cocked an ear, puffed smoke.

"No go," grunted Lockwood. He wanted none of this. Bergston had rigged a neat deadfall for him to stagger into. He sparred for time, tried to think.

"Where's Hank Thomas lately?" His voice came low and grim.

Big Ben started. He looked surprised. "How'd you figure it out that Hank dry-gulched Jake so quick?" he asked

It was Lockwood's turn to be startled. He'd figured the slant-jawed gunman had something to do with Jake being beefed but to hear Big Ben admit it was too much.

"Thomas kind of double-crossed me on that one," added Bergston, "but he's hiding out under cover for awhile." He eyed the ceiling.

"Well?" he asked again and temper began to show again.

Les shook his head, "Sounds good, Ben," he answered, "but it isn't the way I play my hand."

Bergston frowned. He wasn't used to being bucked in any way and showed it.

"I'm willing to listen," he said, "if you've got a better idea of how we can get you out and cash in."

"I can find where Jake had his hideout," Les said slowly, watched suspicion gleam in the blue eyes locked with his own, "but I'm willing to take chances on clearing myself after I'm out—or else I can hide out, split up with you and clear out of the range." He waited.

Bergston appeared lost in thought. He said, "All right."

"But first," cut in Les sharply, "I want to settle with Hank Thomas."

The cigar jerked skyward. A sly smile came on Bergston's face. He nodded, "Hank crossed me up. I think he's found out where Jake's strike was and is just waiting for time to cut me down. Doesn't think I know it." Determination made the muscles underneath the layers of fat stand out, "It's a deal." He signed Thomas' life away. "He's in my Tall Pine Line camp waiting for me to show up tonight."

"After settling with Hank," promised Les Lockwood grimly, "I'll get in touch with you and tell you where the gold cache must be."

"If that's the way you want it," Big Ben agreed, "I'll have Grey decoyed out and a couple of men down here tonight to break you out of jail."

He started to go, then turned on his heel. His big body blocked out the shafts of sunlight from the drying sun. Shadows blocked out the grimness of his soft face. His shadow fell across the cell door. He licked his lips, "I forgot to mention," he said, "that Thomas got part of a map from old Jake's slicker before you scared him off. It was wet and tore and he discovered afterwards that he only had about half of it."

Silence held the jail in a deathly grip.

Bergston's face split open, showed his small white teeth, "I figure you've got the other half of the map," he said. "I copied Hank's, slipped back the original."

He paused, "Just wanted to let you know that all of your play didn't go. Les—so's we'll be on an even footing. We got to trust each other."

"Tried to bluff," lied Les easily, "but it

didn't work on you." He played for a moment, "At least it'll be an honest deal this time, Ben."

"An honest deal," echoed Big Ben. "Your half and mine and we're both rich."

"Old Jake," he added without feeling, "was a fool with a fortune in his lap; all he wanted was to herd cattle and gamble for small stakes."

"We won't be that foolish," he finished.

"Here comes Grey," he added, "it'll be about ten tonight."

GREY stood in the doorway watched Big Ben amble down the street. Les lounged against his cell door, made his lips move. Sam Grey stared hard at him, shook his head sadly.

"Lockwood," he said, "you had the makings of a right good puncher or rancher, just headed wrong."

He gestured toward the departing Bergston. "There," he said, "is a man who made good. Started with nothing, now he's the tops. You should have taken his advice yesterday and not played the idiot by trying to get away."

Having delivered his lecture Grey busied himself at his desk.

Les slouched back on the bunk, fought down the nervousness. Once outside he had a chance to save his neck. He could run for it—but first he had to even up for the butchering of old Jake.

The break when it came was neat and well turned.

He came up on his bunk. Grey's lamp furnished feeble illumination for the office. Rain had started spattering again. Grey laughed at him. "Just some drunk," he grumbled, "showing off."

Shots cut through the heavy air. Grey looked aggravated. He shoved his pile of circulars back, called out, "Lem!"

Lem came from upstairs, a tall heavily whiskered man, he packed a huge .45 in scarred leather holster at his right hip, stared about. Les knew him for the night turnkey.

From down in the Mexican quarter came a chorus of yells, mingled with the screams of women and the flurry of more shots.

Les turned his face. Leave it to Big Ben to do things up right. He peered at the clock on his desk. It was five minutes till eight.

Grey hurried out, sour and unhappy. His square figure disappeared into the blackness toward the river side.

Lem seated himself heavily. He tilted back his chair, propped up his feet, dropped his chin on his chest.

Commotion still raged in the far end of town. Les tried to figure the thing out. It would take Grey almost five minutes to reach the collection of frame shacks and adobe houses that lined the river bank. Lem, head rolled to one side, seemed to be sound asleep. His heavy handlebar moustaches twitched with his breathing. Les felt his own breath quicken. Rain swished about outside, ran from the gutters of the jail, splashed on the ground. Tomahawk range was getting an overdose of good medicine.

The man slipped in so easily that he seemed a shadow. One minute the jail door was empty, then a lean figure stepped swiftly inside. Les saw the masked face turn toward him. There could be no recognition here. Lem stirred in his dream, moved his feet about.

Light flashed from the gun barrel. Les winced. At close range the heavy steel bit into the head of night guard Lem. It made his own head ache. Lem didn't say a word. His head fell forward until it rested on the desk. Les eyed the masked man move with certainty. This jasper, he concluded, knew his way around. He heard the jingle of keys.

"There's a horse outside," whispered the fast-acting gent. Les kept his mouth shut. The stranger's right hand was still full of Colt and he'd shown that he knew how to use it. Something was vaguely familiar about the man's lithe figure. He dismissed it abruptly. This was Bergston's part of the play. Once outside he'd start a play of his own. He had to keep his word with the kingpin of Tomahawk range.

"Nice work," he said. He stopped to search the sheriff's desk for his guns—slipped a note in it.

"Get moving," grated the masked rider. "Grey'll be due back any minute and boiling mad about getting out in the rain."

So this ranny knew of the fake fight that had pulled Grey out of sight. Bergston had stacked his play well. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Reckon you're right," he answered, moving toward the door.

At the far end of the jail, out of sight from the river end he found a horse. He whipped about, dropped flat. At close range the masked man was cutting down on him. No mistake about that. Lightning

flared. Behind the mask two eyes glared with hate. Even as he dove forward bitterness mixed with the confusion within him. This part didn't make sense. Orange flame blossomed from the masked rider's jutting hand. Fire raked his skull. Then he smacked into the mystery man's knees, brought him crashing to the ground. Oaths ripped the silence. This gent was as wiry and as scrappy as a wildcat. His knee, jabbed upward, brought sharp pains that made Les wince. His own hands grabbed the skinny wrist, forced the six-gun back to earth.

He heard spurred feet clumping on the wet board walks that led to the jail. Desperation drove him. That would probably be Sam Grey on his way back. Blows smacked into his face, spread his nose into a gory mess. He hammered back, felt his right hand sink deep into the little man's stomach. For a moment he let go of the gun-arm. His left hand punch felt good and solid right up to his shoulder.

UNDERNEATH him the wiry body went limp. He started to jerk the mask off, read the riddle beneath the blue bandanna with the two eyeholes. Grey's yell sounded from the jail. He let the head smack back into the heavy grass, stripped off the double gun belts from the slim waist.

He had a call to make first. Bergston could wait until after he'd paid a call on Hank Thomas at the Tall Pines of the Cross Bar outfit.

The big gelding under him had plenty of bottom. He drove hard. Grey would be out with a posse behind him. He grinned. This rain was a gully washer. His tracks would be safe for awhile. Grey might find the note he'd slipped into his desk. He'd banked on the lawman being too hot under the collar to look for a note. His lips drew into a thin gash. If he failed in this, the note might give Grey something to go upon. He'd pegged the lawman for a man just at heart, but under political pressure. Unless he was right, dead right, Grey wouldn't buck the pull that Big Ben Bergston could put upon him. The mystery of the jasper who's freed him—then tried to cut him down—nettled him. Here he'd had the thing all worked out—and then a wild, locoed maverick had twisted the whole devil's deal about.

Air became heavy and oppressive. Slanting sheets of water cut him to the bone. There was no slicker in the big gelding's saddle roll. He hunched his wide shoulders together, rode grimly.

Tall Pines camp showed light from its window. A hundred yards away he came to a halt in a clump of jack-pines. Directly ahead of him the shack stood in a little hollow that boasted a small ramshackle corral. The gelding he left behind in the grove of pines. He moved forward slowly, palms resting on the butts of the Colts. No sound of life came from the line cabin. He kicked the door open, jumped to one side. No thunder of guns came. He stepped inside. Sweat ran down his face. He felt foolish. Somehow he'd expected anything but this. The place was empty.

He sat down, rolled a smoke, planned his next move. So far he'd accomplished nothing except make a rope tighter around his neck if Sam Grey laid hands on him and if Bergston's cold deck fell the way the big man had figured for it to fall.

He rose to his feet. He might as well hit for the Cross Bar outfit, try to put the fear of lead trouble into Big Ben Bergston. Despite his heartiness, Big Ben had a yellow streak down his back. It was his wildcat chance, the joker in the deck. He started for the door.

From out on the hills came the sound of a man burning up the distance behind him. He stiffened. Eyes strained. If that was Grey he had nothing to do but run for it like a whipped cur—or sit tight and be framed into prison. The sound died out abruptly. He stamped out the butt of his smoke, crouched back in the far corner next to the double tier of bunks built against the wall.

No further sound came. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. Whoever the rider was he was sneaking up onto the cabin. Sam Grey, posse backed, wouldn't have done that. The lawman was too straight forward to play a long chance by himself.

Again the door opened. Thunder rolled in long claps that sounded like the heavens were splitting open in a grand Fourth of July display of vivid, crackling light. A figure blocked out the light. Les felt the bunks at his back. The figure struck a match, lit the oil lamp.

"Thomas!" Les snapped the word.

Hank Thomas, wet slicker shedding water on the floor whipped about. His hand went for his gun beneath the slicker, froze half-

way there. His face paled while his eyes gleamed. He grinned without mirth.

"I'm no fool, Lockwood. All I ask is an even break."

"Bergston told me I'd find you here," snapped Les. He came from the wall. Thomas stood without moving.

This ranny was gun game. After his surprise he showed no emotion, stood there weighing his chances.

Thomas licked his lips, said, "Bergston sent you, eh?"

"Yes." Lockwood stared hard at the gun-hipped man in the wet slicker. He jabbed with the gun. "Take your slicker off, Hank. I'll give you a better chance than you gave old Jake."

For a minute the icy control of the gunman broke. His Adam's apple danced a jig in his scrawny throat.

"So that's it," he said flatly. "I didn't down Jake."

"Big Ben claims you did," Les drove hard.

Vulture-like Hank Thomas jerked about. a huge .45 that stared with unwinking eye at him.

"First we'll shed the shooting irons," Big Ben stepped in out of the rain. He gestured with one gun, apologized with humor, "I'm not in the same class with you gents on the draw, so I drew first."

Hank Thomas swore bitterly. His lean hands unbuckled his gun belts. Les moved without feeling. Big Bergston had the jump on both of them. His guns joined Thomas' on the board floor. Big Ben chuckled.

"Nothing like letting the dumb ones wipe each other out first," he said.

Les watched the man hawkeyed. He was no fool. Ben could chop him down, would do so without mercy.

"I told Thomas I wouldn't break you out till nine," he said. "Figured Thomas would try to ambush you, Lockwood."

"And that I'd gun down Thomas," Les replied. He considered diving for his guns. Bergston shook his head. "Don't try it, Les." Ugliness changed his face to a solid mask of greed.

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"I don't take that talk," he flared. "I knew Jake had struck it rich. I'd cashed ore for him. Tried trailing him." He shook his long head. "For an old-timer he was sure slippery."

Les felt like he'd been butting his head against a stone wall. He changed tactics.

"OLD Jake had a map," he said. "I found part of it." He finished his baiting, halted.

Thomas leered. He eyed the gun in Lockwood's hand. He threw his slicker over a chair. "More'n I got then," he replied. "All I got is a hazy idea of the general section off of Old Whitecap where Jake hit it."

"Which is as far as you'll ever git!"

Hank Thomas spun about. Les Lockwood twisted to one side. Big Ben Bergston stood in the doorway. The little blue eyes were cold and specks of hell fire danced in them. His fat hands were steady, held

"Quit blowin'!" Thomas said. "Where do you come in?"

Bergston waved one gun airily. "I just figured that as an undercover partner, Thomas, you were washed out." He caught his breath. "You'd remind me of the past, Hank."

He added, "You know too much."

"Lockwood," he continued, "you're just a goat. I knew old Jake had struck it rich but like I told you, Thomas double-crossed me." He looked sad, doubtful of man's loyalty.

Les laughed harshly. Before Big Ben squeezed the trigger he'd make one play. Ben was sealing his doom with every word.

He prodded, "And the bank robbery?"

Bergston was well pleased with himself. "I pulled that. Garrity took Hank's place. I planted the money in your house, Les. You came in handy. I was over extended and could use the money.

"You're a gut-shooting coward," Thomas flared. He eyed his guns.

"I'll be a gut-shooter," warned Ben carellessly in his word, eagle-eyed in his manner, "if you move."

Thomas spat on the floor, "I got half of Jake's map," he said, "I'm pulling out—you won't shoot because you want that map."

"And I'm wanting to even for Jake," anger rode high in Les' tone. He cursed himself silently for letting Thomas throw him off guard.

"Exactly," agreed Big Ben. "Thomas, you are right. I want that map. It's on you. The same goes for you, Lockwood."

His face became a flinty mask of determination, "and I'm not making any deals to get them."

"Grey," he added, "will put it down that you both shot yourselves."

Les Lockwood tensed himself. Big Ben wasn't pulling a windy now. Greed and lust had given him nerves of steel and determination began to tighten the fingers on the triggers of his guns.

Les Lockwood said abruptly, "Hello, Garrity."

Big Ben Bergston laughed. He said, "I'm not turning around for that old-timer, Lockwood." Thomas said nothing. His harsh face paled.

"He ain't bluffing," Garrity's harsh, high-pitched voice came from behind Ben Bergston. Ben looked surprised.

He said, "I didn't tell you to come out, Garrity."

Garrity spoke slowly, "I tried to chop Lockwood down for making a fool of me."

"You broke me out of jail?" Les kept his eyes on the lithe figure of Bergston's new top gun hand. This thing was adding up wrong. Garrity's face had a queer pinched look on it.

"Thanks," Bergston said. "You can help me out, Garrity."

Garrity stood against the side of the door.

"Grey was gone when I came to," he said. "Missed me in the excitement."

"Let's get it over with," Hank Thomas cut in. "You take too blame long, Bergston."

Big Ben started to say something, left his fat lips open. Garrity had one gun prodded into his ribs. He said, "Just drawing top wages for risking my neck ain't enough, Bergston."

Bergston kept his guns. His face went a sickly green. He choked, "Garrity?"

"Yeah," drawled Garrity, "I just decided after listening to you, Ben, that I was a lobo fool when I can be a rich mine owner."

Les Lockwood started forward, came to a quick stop. Garrity was like a sidewinder. He'd already rattled.

He laughed in Ben's face, "What Garrity is doing is changing the ending," he said. "It'll look like we all shot each other."

"Thanks," drawled Garrity, "I ain't as fancy with words as Ben here." Steely purpose leveled his guns up.

Bergston opened his mouth, gasped for words.

Hank Thomas stood unflinching, his hands nervously opening and closing for his missing guns. Les Lockwood dove headfirst.

THUNDER echoed inside the room. The oil lamp smashed beneath his chest. Glass raked sharp slashes across his skin. Oil smarted in the cuts. The room went dark.

Bergston screamed throatily. Lockwood shuddered. At close range Garrity, gold mad, had shot the big boss of Tomahawk range through the body. Bergston's body thudded against the floor. He waited a minute. Silence held the room. He eased toward his dropped gunbelts. Somewhere he knew Hank Thomas must be fumbling for his guns. Garrity had gone into hiding. His guns would spout death at anybody.

This was a devil's playroom and Satan was dealing death cards to every player.

Big Ben wasn't dead yet. His sobbing cries came from near the doorway. He screamed again. Les felt chills seize him. Garrity must have used a knife that time to keep from giving his position away.

Time dragged, yet he knew it must have been only seconds. Flame thundered from the far end of the room. Bullets slugged into the wood. That was Hank Thomas slinging lead desperately.

Garrity's guns flamed. Hank Thomas groaned. His six-guns flared again. Bullets thudded into flesh.

Gorge rose in Les Lockwood's throat, threatened to choke him. Garrity had taken cover behind Ben Bergston's gun-shot and knife-ripped body. He still hadn't reached the spot where his gunbelts had hit the floor.

Lead hammered into the floor. He halted abruptly. Gun-wise, Garrity had figured that play out. He'd slung lead where he'd last spotted the guns on the floor.

Silence came from Hank Thomas' corner.

Hard breathing came. Les knew the rail-thin killer must have soaked up some of Garrity's slugs. He was lying low, cornered but still desperate.

Just how desperate he saw a moment later.

Lightning lit the room, revealed Hank Thomas, doubled over in pain, boots off, heading for the door.

Twin guns jutted from his hands. Garrity's guns roared in the darkness. Then Thomas' Colt roared savagely. Garrity yelped once. Flame came still in jabbing fingers of orange light from Hank Thomas' big guns. Les saw the muzzles droop lower. Dying, Hank Thomas had only the undying lust to bring down with him the man who'd passed his own rate of gunspeed.

Even as Thomas toppled, Garrity switched his fire. Lead slugs sent splinters from the floor. One riccocheted from the butts of Les Lockwood's Colt.

Garrity's harsh voice sounded.

"You're the last one, Lockwood. I've beefed Thomas, gutted Bergston and I'll slap my bullet brand on you."

Les Lockwood dove again. He'd crawled up toward Bergston's limp body from underneath the table. Getting his guns would be inviting suicide. The crazed Garrity had the range to the inch. Garrity's last words were hardly out of his mouth when he dove on the huge body of the dead Bergston.

Garrity yelped. He tried to swing his guns about.

Les laughed savagely. Vicious and gun-struck Garrity hadn't figured on a fight without guns vomiting lead.

He tried again to wrench his gun hands into play. Les smashed hard, felt his fist break off the buck teeth of the gunman. Garrity squalled. His arm whipped about. Les felt his head jarred. Garrity had slammed him at close range with the side of his gun.

There could be no mercy here. He didn't want to kill the gunman. Alive, Garrity might clear him. He drove hammering blows at the face of the man. Blood spurted from the beaklike nose. Garrity fought back; his guns hit the floor.

He gasped, "Fer gawd's sake, quit poundin' me."

Les snapped his split lips with another punch. Garrity cried, "I'll come clean."

"And then welch," Les whispered low. "Put it in writing, Garrity."

Garrity sobbed, "Anything." Fearless with a gun in his hand, he felt lost now.

FEET sounded again in the doorway. Les grabbed for Garrity's guns on the floor.

Sam Grey's voice came cool and unexcited.

He said:

"What a slaughter house."

Garrity said:

"Get this devil off me, Grey. He's beefed Bergston and Thomas. Almost had me."

Sam Grey laughed. "After listening to you brag, Garrity, I think a noose will fit your neck nicely."

Les Lockwood came to his feet, looked about him. Big Ben Bergston, blood staining his shirt, lay huddled up in a limp heap. From his chest protruded the handle of a knife driven in deep. Hank Thomas had been literally cut to pieces by Garrity's accurate fire.

He felt worn out—nothing to fight for.

His words sounded hollow—"I was beginning to think you'd overlooked my note, Sheriff."

Sam Grey turned about. He cocked his head to one side, "I didn't figure an outlaw would give a lawman a straight tip." He frowned, "But Lem has still got a headache from that nasty crack."

"Charge it to Garrity," said Les. "He's the one that sprung me."

His half dollar lucky piece flipped into the air, smacked into the palm of his other hand.

THE END

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THE FEUD AT THE ★ ROCKING M ★

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One move from Rex Martin would fan that ancient, bitter feud into flames that blood alone could quench. Yet even when treacherous Fraker guns cut his brother down, and his own clan called him coward, Rex refused to draw steel. For he had vowed that neither Martin men nor Fraker men would die to feed the killer-lust of a land-mad range hog that he alone could conquer!

By Wilbur S. Peacock

CHAPTER I

THE rushing wind sang a tiny melody to Rex Martin as he rode the paint at the head of the band of Rocking M men, and the muted thunder of racing hoofbeats was a bass rhythm that sent the blood singing through his veins.

He rode with the casual ease of the range men, his body swaying evenly in the leather, riding as a part of the horse, his deceptively wide shoulders erect, his flat-crowned Stetson shading the grey eyes above the sharp nose and generous mouth that were his heritage from the Martin clan.

Tommy Martin, eighteen, impetuous and redheaded, edged his black to the right of his brother's horse, turned burning eyes to the lithe man who was the acknowledged head of the Martin clan.

"I think you're wrong, Rex," he called above the rolling thunder of hoofbeats. "There will never be peace between the Martins and the Frakers. I think this is some trick to get us into a position where the Frakers can wipe us out by superior numbers!"

A flop-eared jack broke cover, raced in headlong fright toward mesquite flats, then stopped in sudden impulse and watched the tightly-knit group of horsemen thunder by, like some bit of frozen life.

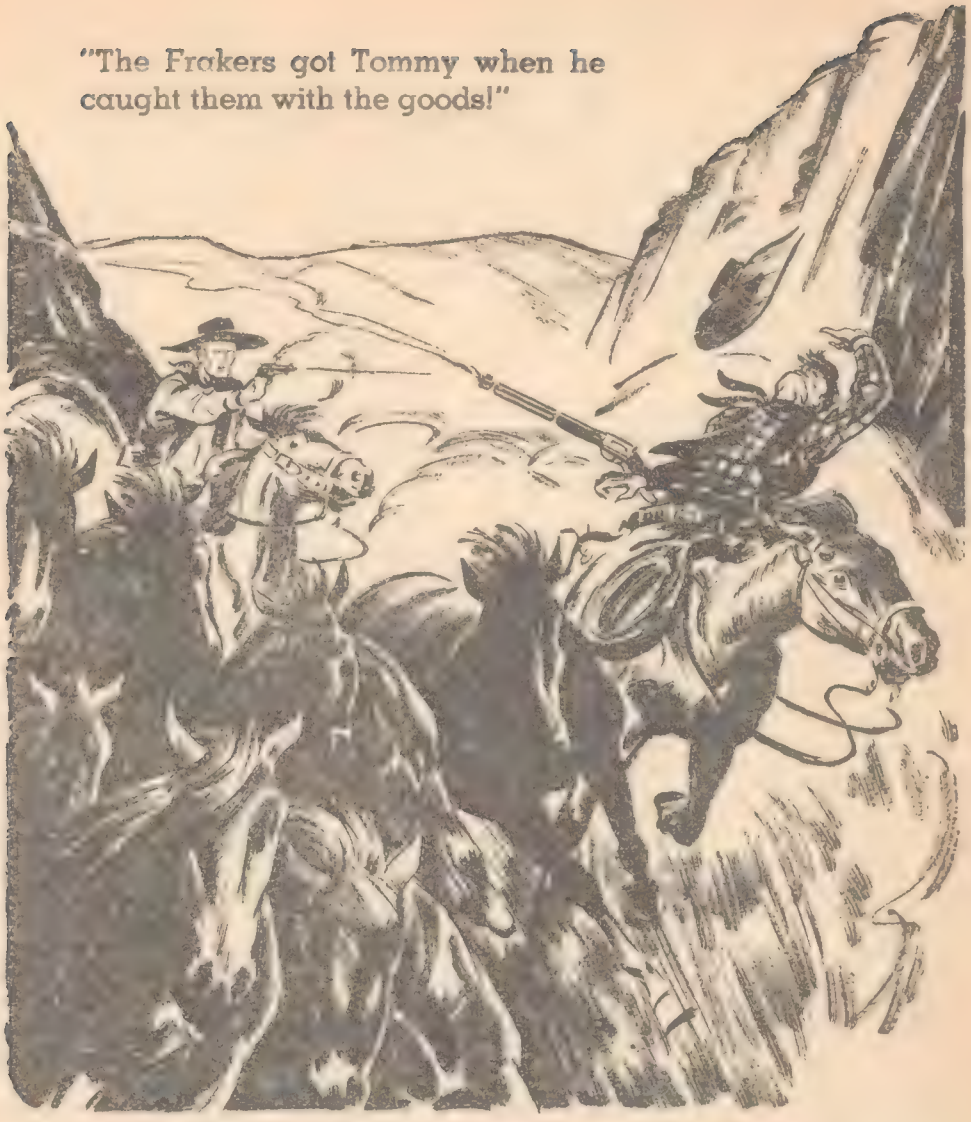
Rex Martin flicked his gaze to the intent face of his youngest brother, felt the burning impact of the youth's eyes, then turned his face ahead again. He felt, anew, that tiny chill of premonition banding about his heart.

"Majority vote made the decision," he called back, "I am guided by that."

Tommy Martin spat disdainfully, allowed his racing black to fade back into the group of riders. He went silent, feeling the curious sympathetic glances of the men, shrugging a bit in wry defeat when he remembered the even timbres of his brother's voice.

Rex Martin grinned to himself, fumbled a tailor-made from his checked shirt, lit it with a quick cupping of his bronzed hands. He drew the smoke in thoughtfully, seeing the abrupt blot on the green sweeping plain that was Sundown. He noted the filmy cloud of dust settling at the edge of town, and knew that the Fraker men were even then arriving for the meeting that would close forever the hate-filled feud that had been fought so viciously for more than fifty years.

He felt good then, felt good with a lilting uptake of his spirits that brought unconscious laughter to his lips. For he alone had conceived and engineered this historic meeting between his men and those headed by John Fraker.



And some of that feeling came from the warm thoughts of Mary Fraker, the realization coming to him that with the feud gone and forgotten, there would be no barrier between them as there was before.

Rex Martin could not fully remember the basis of the feud; the passing years had dulled and softened its clear sharp edges until it was but a family legend whose origin must always be fought for with crimson-slashing guns.

He knew only that, some fifty years before, his grandfather and John Fraker's grandfather had been partners on a rolling spread they called the Loop L. Somehow, as the climax to an argument one night, there had been flashing gun-play, and when the sounds of battle faded a Martin man and a Fraker man lay dead in the dust of the corral, their hot blood intermingling in a smoking pool. It was then that the feud was born, born of an argument the cause of which had long been forgotten.

The passing years had brought no surcease to the fight; for as time passed, the clans grew and spread and dominated until there was a clear line of demarcation across the valley—on the west of which the Martins ruled supreme, and on the east of which only the Loop L brand was found.

But times were changing now; the period of the cattle kings was drawing to a close, crushed and strangled by the hopeful men and women who pushed ever Westward in search of land that would blossom at the touch of their iron-tongued plows.

Rex Martin thought of that and thought of many things as he rode; things that would have been found blasphemous in the minds of his great roaring grandfather or his lean silent father, both of whom had died in the great fight at the salt flats seven years before.

But Rex Martin was of the new generation; he thought more of life than of death —and for more than three years he had fought as hard to end the senseless feud as his father and grandfather had struggled to keep its dulling flame alive.

He was the head of the Martins now, and his word was law, even with the limitations he had given himself by instituting the unheard of procedure of giving each member of the clan a vote as to the best method of handling any situation.

And now he was riding at the head of twenty-four men to a meeting that almost everyone predicted was doomed to failure. But Rex Martin knew that he dare not fail, for with failure would come extinction—not from blasting six-shooters, but from the greedy implacable enroachment of the eastern money that was slowly pushing back the last frontier and molding a country in which the westerner had no place.

Rex Martin felt that and felt many other things, and he knew that his plan for com plete peace between the Rocking M and the Loop L would mean an exchange of land and rights and men that would form an impregnable barrier through which defeat could come for neither because of disease or drouths or deliberate ruining of either by control of credit by the ruthless eastern land factions.

THE dusty road twisted and straightened, and Sundown dozed sleepily in the bright sunshine a half mile ahead. Rex tugged lightly on the reins, held his arm up for attention. Slowly the men brought their mounts to a halt, and for seconds there were only the sounds of the breathing horses. Then Rex Martin circled his paint, faced the men who watched him out of silent, inscrutable eyes.

"This is the end of the feud, men," Rex Martin said gently. "When we ride out of Sundown tonight, we ride with the knowledge that never again will there be a line separating the Fraker and the Martin spreads. I don't say that we'll feel any different to each other, but there will be an end to this damnable blood-letting that has gone on for half a century without solving anything. Now, I want your promise to let me do the talking, no matter what comes up at the meeting!"

Tommy Martin edged his black forward, faced his brother across ten feet of space. "I'll promise nothing," he snapped, "I'm going in with loose guns, and God help the first Fraker that makes a move I don't like!"

Rex Martin's grey eyes were as suddenly cold and emotionless as polished bits of granite. "Jim, Harry, Trig," he said, "you are to stay at Tommy's side. If he makes a move to pull iron, you are to stop him instantly."

Tommy Martin flushed, his youthful shoulders stiffening belligerently, his slim hands dropping to the walnut butts of his Colts.

"No one takes my guns!" he said loudly.

"You heard my orders; you can follow them and come with us, or you can high-tail it back to the ranch, just as you please. I'll not see this peace plan shot to hell by a hot-headed kid."

For a long moment the brothers' eyes clashed, and then Tommy shrugged, twisted up a quirly with fingers none too steady. Rex Martin watched him for a moment, then smiled, the craggy hardness of his face softening.

"I know how you feel, Tommy," he said gently. "I felt the same way at your age. But those feelings don't count now; this is the moment when emotions are out—this is a time for brains and steady speech." He looked back at the silent group of men. "Well," he asked, "do I do the talking?"

Trig Martin nodded his grizzled head, spoke for the men around him. "All right, Rex," he said, "you're the boss. You may be right, then again you might be wrong—but we'll string along with you and play the cards the way you deal."

For one interminable moment, Rex Martin could not speak past the choking lump in his throat. Then he lifted his arm, swung it forward. "Come on," he yelled, "let's ride!"

CHAPTER II

THE STEADY drumming of hoofbeats against the clapboard buildings echoed like distance-muted gunfire. A shaggy dog yelped wildly, fled between the bank and the blacksmith shop, then turned and growled from the safety of its retreat. The windows were blank staring critical eyes watching, waiting for the outcome of the meeting of the two dominant powers of the valley.

A Fraker waddie lounged from one end of the hitch-rack before the Town Hall, crossed the walk, and called something into the building.

Rex Martin and his men stopped before the saloon hitching rail, tug-knotted their reins, then walked self-consciously the few yards to the Hall, suddenly quiet and watchful, nerves tense, hands close to sagging gunbelts.

John Fraker met them at the door. He nedded cordially to the Martin men, gripped Rex Martin's hand in a fist of granite hardness.

"Glad you came, Rex," he said. "It's time this meeting came about."

Rex Martin grinned, stood aside to allow his men to edge through the door. He felt a bond of comradeship between him and the blocky John Fraker that came from their single purpose.

"You had the papers drawn up?" he asked.

John Fraker nodded, his eyes friendly. "Bart Kingston is waiting inside; he has them."

A TINY shadow flickered across the grey of Rex's eyes. He felt again that vague premonition tightening about his heart. Bart Kingston was a new element in the political structure of the valley; a man who wasn't necessarily on either side, a man he did not fully trust.

But he said nothing, for he wanted nothing said that might interfere with the success of the meeting. And in analyzing his distrust, he knew that its basis could be traced to the rumors that Mary Fraker and Bart Kingston were keeping steady company.

John Fraker must have guessed his thought, for he swung suddenly, lowered his voice so that others could not hear.

"I've got a message for you from Mary," he said, laughed softly at the instant flush that deepened the tan of the other's face. "She said to tell you she was so proud of you and your plan that she could bust. And she said to tell you to come out to the ranch tonight for fried chicken."

Rex Martin shrugged, went through the door, rubbing his mouth thoughtfully so that the pleased smile could not be seen by John Fraker's calm eyes.

"Time for that later," he said deprecatingly. "Let's get this business over with."

They walked the narrow aisle, conscious of the steady eyes of the men seated on the benches on either side, climbed the short flight of steps to the stage, took their places on the chairs beside the one occupied by Bart Kingston.

"Glad to see you again, Martin," Bart Kingston said cordially.

"Thanks!" Rex Martin answered, felt again that sensibility of inferiority that the slim man always gave him.

John Fraker came to his feet, tapped unnecessarily for quiet on the speaker's table. He stood quietly for a moment, surveying the sixty men that comprised the audience, feeling the tension that emanated from the two clans sitting across the aisle from each other.

"Men," he said gently, "I'm not making any speeches. All of you know what this meeting means to me. I just want to say that I hope all of you will abide by any decision made by myself and Rex Martin." He turned slightly. "Maybe Martin has something he wants to say to you?"

Rex Martin lounged to his feet, stood lithely shoulder to shoulder with his hereditary enemy. He swallowed convulsively, prayed silently that his voice would remain matter-of-fact in its intonations.

"This meeting came about because of the salt flat battle seven years ago. I saw fourteen men killed then, men who should still be alive; and I suddenly realized how futile the whole feud was. Now, there are still one or two of my men in whom the killing fever still runs hot, just as, I suppose, there are some Fraker men who would like nothing better than to cut down on a Martin man. I don't say there won't be any shooting, but I do say that there should be no more deliberate murders. As head of the Martins, I pledge that I shall do all in my power to stop any overt acts on the part of my men."

John Fraker nodded, thrust out his heavy hand. "I give my promise, too," he said, "I swear the feud is over."

For one interminable second there was silence, then sound exploded in the hall, echoing and ringing with a glad fervor. Rex Martin and John Fraker stood silently on the stage, their hands locked, smiling at the crowd with blurred eyes. Then John Fraker held up his hand for silence.

"Our word is enough," he said, when the shouting stopped, "but we intend to make the whole proceeding legal. Bart Kingston has drawn up a legal paper declaring our intentions, and Martin and I are going to be the first signers. Then the rest of you are going to sign before you go. Kingston will hold the paper for us, and should deliberate killings start, it will be used as evidence in court."

He turned, took the long sheet of paper from the lawyer's hand, signed it with a flourish of the long pen on the desk. Then he handed the pen to Rex Martin, stepped back as the other signed with steady fingers.

"To hell with you!" Tommy Martin was on his feet then, his red head flaming over a white face, his eyes blazing, his youthful voice suddenly harsh and strange.

TRIG MARTIN reached up, caught at the youth with a powerful hand, only to have it knocked aside impatiently. There was only silence in the room, a silence that was created and dominated by the reckless strength of the youth standing so defiantly erect.

"I wouldn't sign a damned thing with any Fraker," Tommy Martin said bitterly, "And I won't sign a thing that has a traitor Martin's name on it. I remember that salt flat fight, too, and I remember it was a Fraker who fired the first shot. I'm giving warning; any Fraker who crosses my path had better come with gun out!"

He turned, stalked with echoing heel-taps up the aisle and out of the room. Voices raised in instant, defiant confusion.

Rex Martin caught up the gavel, smashed it thunderously on the table. His eyes were cold and hard, and tiny lines of strain wiped every emotion from his face.

"The feud is over," he stated clearly, evenly, "I stand responsible for my brother. He is a hot-headed kid, but a night or two of thinking will clear his mind. Now, you can start signing whenever you please."

He seated himself in his chair, answering automatically the words spoken to him by the signing men, conscious of the sardonic glances of Bart Kingston and of the sympathy of John Fraker. He was glad that the feud was over for all time. Yet there was the fear in his heart, a fear in him that he could not control the impetuosity of his younger brother; and the thought that all of his work might be in vain because of the hot blood of a reckless youth filled his mind with a sense of futility that he could not suppress.

John Fraker watched the last man sign the pledge, then turned and handed the long sheet to Bart Kingston. "Take care of this, Kingston," he said, "Maybe, if there's ever a museum in Sundown, this will be a big exhibit."

Bart Kingston nodded, placed the paper in a flat briefcase. He sat for a moment, watching the boisterous crowd of mixed men, then left by the side door with a muttered farewell to Rex Martin that went unheard.

John Fraker laid his heavy hand on Rex's shoulder, grinned into the other's serious eyes. "Take it easy, Rex," he advised, "Tommy won't start anything, and I'll give orders to my men to avoid him."

Rex Martin smiled, built a quirly, watched the laughing men in the hall, some of the old fervor back in his heart when he saw that the old line dividing the clans was no longer there.

But the same premonition of danger lurked in a corner of his mind, and he knew that it would be literally months before the old wounds healed and peace would come forever into Sundown valley.

CHAPTER III

MARY FRAKER was almost tiny beside the lithe strength of Rex Martin. She sat on the organ bench, her small feet moving the pedals in a smooth rhythm, and her fingers seemed to dance over the keyboard.

John Fraker slouched comfortably in the great, wool-padded chair before the huge fireplace, drew meditatively on his aged pipe, lifted his voice now and then in a bass bellow to one of the songs the girl drew from the organ.

Rex Martin leaned on the organ, not singing, just listening to the melodies. He had an absurd desire to reach out and tuck back the loose fluff of warm brown hair

at the nape of Mary's neck. Mary seemed to read his mind, for she tucked in the bit of hair, smiled lightly into his intent eyes with a directness that brought the red tiding up from his collar into his tanned cheeks.

"What are you thinking of, Rex?" she asked softly.

Rex Martin smiled sheepishly, twisted the cider glass in long fingers. ""I was just thinking," he said, "how much you look like those pictures in the mail-order catalogues, what with—Oh, the devil! I was just thinking how pretty you are."

And now it was the girl who blushed. She became suddenly intent on the music, her eyes avoiding his, but with her dimples skidding into sight unconsciously.

John Fraker coughed loudly from his chair, then came slowly to his feet. "I guess I'd better take a look and see if the boys are handling that herd on the south forty all right," he said, "I won't be gone more than an hour or so."

He stood for a moment in the door, chuckling to himself when his words went unnoticed. Shaking his head a bit, he closed the door after him, went slowly toward the corral.

Behind him, in the warm lamp-light of the room, Mary ceased her playing of a dreamy waltz for a moment.

"John is gone," she remarked.

"Huh!" Rex Martin straightened, shrugged a bit when he saw the laughing mockery in the girl's eyes. "Maybe I better go, too," he said embarrassedly. "It might cause talk if I was here alone with you. After all, it's almost nine o'clock."

Mary moved slightly on the bench, drew Rex down beside her. She smiled into his eyes, then blushed again at what she read there.

"Will you marry me?" Rex Martin blurted. "I know I haven't got much right to ask, but seeing as how I'm so much in love with—"

And then she was in his arms, the warmness of her mouth against his, her slender body shaking a bit as he held her so tightly.

"Oh, Rex!" she said softly, "Oh, Rex!"

Rex Martin could never, afterward, recall those splendid moments in which he held Mary so closely. To him, they were just a blur in which time stood still, and in which all of the beauty of the world seemed coalesced in Mary's eyes and features.

He told her of his dreams, and was startled by the fact that she was the focal point about which every dream resolved. He kissed her tender lips, feeling strangely huge and uncouth beside the smallness of her.

And when he rode into the night, he could still smell the fragrance of her hair and feel the warmth of her mouth on his.

He rode slowly, swaying lithely in the saddle, still filled with the glories of the past hour, peopling dream after dream with the figures of him and Mary, dreams in which there were no heartaches or worries, dreams in which Mary's quiet understanding laughter solved all problems with ridiculous ease.

He rolled a quirly with unsteady fingers, then shredded it to pieces in his abstraction. His paint picked its way daintily along the path, blowing nervously now and then as a jack bobbed into instant flight across the plains.

The drumming of hoofbeats came down the path, and Rex turned his horse into the shadows of a clump of trees, acting with the automatic instinct that had come from years of dry-gulch fighting. He laughed softly to himself when he realized what he had done, but stayed in hiding, knowing that a sudden appearance might invite a hail of lead.

He frowned a bit to himself, when John Fraker rode past at a fast hand-gallop, then urged his paint out into the path again. He sat quietly for a moment, his eyes probing the darkness into which the rider had disappeared.

THE hoofbeats faded into the night, and Rex swung his mount toward the Martin spread again. He rode faster now, his mind wrestling with the problem of what would make John Fraker ride his horse so hard when there was no need for it.

He listened intently for more hoofbeats, wondering if the rustlers had struck again in the neighborhood, as they had struck on innumerable occasions in the past few months.

There was no sound except for the lonesome wailing of a coyote keening at the moon.

Rex Martin shrugged, lifted his paint into a lope. He rode swiftly for minutes, thinking of nothing now but the plans he and Mary had made for the future.

It was then that the shots sounded flat and deadly in the night ahead.

Rex Martin swore softly, rowelled his paint into a flat run. He swept around the uprise of ground, his eyes darting here and there in the moonlight for a sight of the man who had fired the shots.

He saw the horse first, saw that it had no rider, then swung his gaze about for a sight of other horses. But the plain was bare. The paint snorted suddenly, shied so abruptly that only a quick grasp of the horn kept Rex from being unseated.

He tugged rein, his Colt steady in his right hand, searching the ground for the thing that had set his paint to curveting so suddenly.

And then he was off his horse, running stumblingly across the ground, the gun forgotten in his hand. He knelt, lifted the wounded man's shoulders with gentle hands, his heart filled with a black agony that defied description.

"Who did it, Tommy?" he said gently, "Who shot you, boy?"

Tommy Martin coughed lightly, opened eyes that were dazed and filmed with bullet shock. His mouth gasped a bit for air before he could talk; and then his words were blurred.

"Beefers," he muttered, "Caught beefers on Rocking M herd. . . . Tried to stop them. . . . . Gunplay. . . . Got shot up."

"Who shot you, Tommy? For God's sake, tell me!"

A tiny fluff of red froth touched the youth's mouth. "Got shot," he said, "Musta passed out. . . . Saw John Fraker. . . . Woke up and shot gun to bring help." He twisted suddenly, half sat up. "Damned Frakers!" he said bitterly, "Can't trust. . . ."

He fainted, his breathing ragged and stifled in his throat, his young body slack in Rex Martin's arms.

Rex Martin knelt there in the moonlight, holding tightly his brother's unconscious body, seeing the collapse of all his dreams, knowing that the Martin-Fraker feud had come alive again on the day it was to have died.

He thought he knew now the hypocrisy of John Fraker, thought he knew the thoughts that lay in the other's mind. He remembered now that almost all of the raids had been on the Martin cattle, the few made on the Loop L netting but a few scrub head of stock for the rustlers.

He felt a sickening futility, when he fully comprehended what this shooting meant. It would mean the return of war between the two spreads; it would mean that the peace pledge signed by so many men would be nothing but a memory and a mockery. But worst of all, it meant that never would he and Mary see the fulfillment of the dreams they had made.

Rex Martin got to his feet, lifted Tommy and tied him to the saddle of his horse. His face was utterly expressionless as he bandaged the gunshot wounds, and then climbed into the saddle of his paint.

He rode slowly, leading Tommy's horse, fearful of too much speed. His shoulders were square, and his features were like chiselled stone. He stared straight ahead, a burning rage flaming in his heart, sudden decision coming into his mind.

If Tommy Martin died, shot down by the cowardly guns of a man who had pledged eternal friendship, then John Fraker would die, too, at the flaming muzzles of Rex Martin's guns. And if the need arose, he would order his men into pitched battle with the Frakers for a final ending of the feud, irregardless of the cost to either side.

CHAPTER IV

TRIG MARTIN rolled his sleeves down over heavy wrists, glanced obliquely about the room. "He'll live," he said, "Got a couple of .41 slugs through his chest, one barely nicking a lung. But if the Doc gets here in time, he'll pull through."

Rex Martin ground out his cigarette beneath a boot heel. "Is he conscious?" he asked quietly.

Trig Martin shook his grizzled head, his eyes sharp and piercing. "No," he said, "But he did say a word or two in delirium."

"Then he told you who shot him?"

Trig nodded, lifted his pipe from the mantel, stuffed tobacco in it with a calloused thumb. He leaned broad shoulders against the mantel, looked directly at the other.

"John Fraker did the shooting," he said softly, "What are you going to do about it?"

Rex Martin flushed at the undercurrent of emotion in the older man's voice, knowing the answer he was expected to give, yet feeling again those thoughts that had been with him so many years.

"What should I do?" he countered.

"Do? You know damned well what's to be done! One of us has got to match gunplay with Fraker!"

Rex Martin shook his head. "That won't help matters any," he said tiredly, "It will just mean the reopening of the feud."

"Rex," Trig Martin came lithely erect. "I don't like that talk. Your father was my brother, and that makes you my blood nephew. But I'll gut-shoot you to death if Tommy dies and you don't avenge him!"

"But we don't know for certain that John Fraker did the shooting!"

Rex Martin stopped suddenly, reading the contempt in the other's eyes, knowing the falseness of his words, for he remembered the frantic speed of John Fraker there on the trail.

"I'm going to send out riders to round up the men," Trig Martin said softly, dangerously, "If you're afraid of Fraker, then I'll take my chances. But there's going to be Fraker blood spilled for every drop that Tommy has lost. Now, take your choice; ride for a showdown with John Fraker, or I will."

Rex Martin came to his feet, his eyes bleak and cold. He stood for a long moment, staring at his uncle, a tiny muscle twitching in his jaw.

"I'm riding," he said quietly, "But not to shoot it out with John Fraker. I'm going to take him into town and place him in the custody of the sheriff. This is one time the Law is going to take part in a Martin-Fraker shooting."

Trig Martin laid his pipe on the mantel. "All right, Rex," he said, "if that's the way you want it. But this is a promise; if Tommy dies, I'll personally knot the rope that strings John Fraker up. And I'll personally lead the men who wipe out the Frakers once and for all."

Rex Martin whirled, went from the room, shaken by the quiet hate and fury in Trig Martin's voice, feeling himself caught in a maelstrom of forces against which he could not fight, feeling his every emotion and move guided by a hate-filled feud a half-century old.

He swung into the saddle, lifted the paint into a ground-eating lope away from the ranch. The moon was full-risen now, and the shadows were black on the ground. He took the short cut, skirting the river, fording it at the bend, then swinging directly down the cross trail to the Fraker ranchhouse.

He examined his guns, twirling the cylinders, balancing them in his hands, shuddering a bit at their cool deadliness. He hated the task he had to do, and yet he knew it must be done. He regretted, in some ways, his plan for turning John Fraker over to the sheriff, yet common sense told him it was the only chance he had for avoiding the impending gun battle between the two clans.

And then, so soon that it startled him, he was riding up to the front of the Fraker house which he had left so happily a few hours before. He ground-hitched his paint, dropped lightly from the saddle, stood irresolutely in the night for a moment.

He shrugged impatiently, seeing the lighted windows of the house, went forward swiftly. His footsteps were muted in the dust of the walk, and the only other sound came from the creak of the windmill.

THE guns felt heavy in his hands as he tapped with his right hand gun on the door. He drew a deep breath, knowing that this was the final step that took him from his original plans and dreams.

"Why, hello, Rex!" John Fraker said, blinking a trifle as he peered from the door.

Then he saw the guns in the other's hands, and his face blanched a bit as he took a quick step backward. His hands made an instinctive downward sweep, then stopped at the lift of the twin Colts he faced.

"Come on out, John," Rex Martin said brittlely, "We're riding into Sundown."

"Listen, Rex, you've got the wrong man; there must be a mistake!"

"You made the mistake, when you and your men cut down on my brother!" Rex's words made a tight rush of sound that was strangely harsh and terrible.

"Listen, Rex," John Fraker's eyes did not waver. "I heard the shooting, but I could do nothing because I wasn't wearing my guns. I came back to the house here, got my guns and collected some men, and then rode back to the south forty. But I couldn't find anything. I swear to you that, if your brother was shot down, neither me nor my men had anything to do with it."

"Are you coming, or do you make a play for your guns?"

John Fraker shrugged. "All right, I'll go

peaceably," he said slowly, "I don't want any gunplay."

"John, who is it?" Mary Fraker called from a far room.

For a second, the muzzles of Rex Martin's guns sagged. Then they lifted, beckoned commandingly.

"Thought I heard somebody ride up," John Fraker answered loudly, "I'll take a look around."

Then she was in the room, her slender body wrapped in a Mexican robe, her auburn hair a filmy cloud about her shoulders. She paused in the doorway, brush in hand.

"I wouldn't think—" she began, and then her eyes widened in surprise, the brush dropping unnoticed to the floor.

"What?" she asked, "Rex, what are you doing?"

Rex Martin felt the hot blood burning at his face, but his eyes did not leave John Fraker's tense body.

"I'm sorry, Mary," he said, "sorrier than you will ever know; but I'm taking John into town to turn him over to the sheriff for attempted murder."

"You're joking!" the girl said, moaned softly at the shake of his head.

Rex Martin felt something shatter within his heart at the sound of the incredulity in her voice, but there was something within him now that could not be stopped by anything.

"He and his men shot Tommy down," he said brutally. "Tommy identified him. I'm taking him into town."

"Is that true, John?" Mary asked brokenly.

John Fraker bit his lips, shook his head slightly. "No, Mary," he said quietly, "but I think it's best that I go with Rex."

Mary raced across the floor, caught at her brother's sleeve, her eyes wide and frightened as they watched the impassive face over the twin guns.

"Please, Rex," she pleaded, "Please! You must be wrong. John came back just a little while after you left and said he heard shooting on the Rocking M. He took three of the men with him to investigate, but didn't find anything. He just got back a few minutes ago."

"Come on, John," Rex Martin snapped savagely. "Either you come now, or I cut you down like you did Tommy."

He took a backward step, stood aside to permit John Fraker to pass, then followed the other down the path. Behind him, he could hear the sobbing of the girl. His nerves were taut as he waited for her to call again, and he felt a horrible sense of desolation when she did not.

That feeling did not leave him, while he forced Fraker to drop his gunbelt before mounting a quickly saddled horse, and for minutes, while they rode in silence toward Sundown, he could hear in his mind the muffled sobbing of the bewildered girl.

He knew now, as never before, that never again could he recapture the thoughts and hopes that had been his but a few hours earlier.

CHAPTER V

REX MARTIN and the Sheriff stood for a long moment in the night outside the jail. The Sheriff drew thoughtfully on an unlit pipe, his eyes hooded and speculative as they watched the hardness of Rex's face.

"Sure you're right, son?" he asked quietly.

"I'm right," Rex replied shortly. "Tommy identified him." He spun on one heel, went toward the pale lights of the Overlander Saloon. His even voice drifted over his shoulder. "I'll be in tomorrow for the preliminary hearing."

"Be careful, son," the Sheriff called, "there are a lot of people in the valley who'd hate to get shot up because of a grudge fight in which they had no part."

Rex Martin shivered suddenly, went steadily forward. That tiny flame of passion that had flared in his heart was gone now, and in its place was only a dead blackness that defied description. He walked heavily, scuffing through the dust with dragging steps, his mind going over the Sheriff's last words.

And then he was on the board walk, pushing through the swinging doors of the saloon. Except for five men grouped about a card table at the rear of the cavernous room, the saloon was empty. He stood for a moment singling out Bart Kingston's dapper figure in the dealer's seat, then paced heavily across the echoing floor.

"Hello, Martin," Kingston asked curiously, "what are you doing in town at two o'clock in the morning?"

Rex stopped a few feet from the table, his eyes flat and expressionless. "John Fraker wanted me to find you," he said

evenly. "He's in the jail, held on a murder charge I swore out."

The deck of cards cascaded unnoticed from the lawyer's hand. His lean face worked in surprise, then steadied into a cold watchfulness.

"You swore out a murder charge against Fraker?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes!" Rex Martin's face had the bleakness of tone. "He and his men cut down Tommy a couple of hours ago. I just brought John Fraker in. He asked me to find you and tell you to see him at the jail."

"Hell!" the player on Kingston's right exploded. "You're just asking for trouble! Those Fraker boys will tear your outfit up by the roots." He went silent at Martin's deliberate scrutiny.

Bart Kingston raked in the small pile of bills and silver, got to his feet. "I'll go right over," he said quietly.

Rex stood immobile for a moment, choosing his words with care.

"This is a showdown, Kingston," he said brittlely. "Be careful."

He turned, waiting for no answer, stalked from the saloon, went tiredly across the street to where he had hitched his paint. He pulled the tugknot in the reins, swung into the leather, sent the paint loping out of town.

He slowed his mount on the main road to the Rocking M spread, twisted up a quirly. Somewhere in the night to the right the coyote keened at the moon, and the lonesomeness of the wailing shook Rex's hand as he thumbed a match alight.

He drew heavily of the quirly smoke, flicked the match into the darkness. The moon slipped from behind a cloud, silvered the country in a mantle of paleness, then fled behind the security of another cloud.

The paint whinnied a bit at the sudden savage rowelling of his flanks, went into a flat run toward the ranch. Rex Martin felt the wind whipping at his face and the surging of the horse's muscles, and for a brief moment the sheer thrill of riding wiped all thought from his mind.

Then he was over the rise of ground at the edge of the Rocking M, and far ahead twinkled the yellow lights of the ranchhouse. He shivered a bit, knowing what the brilliance of the lights meant—the gun-call had gone out for the Martins, and even now, the clan was gathering!"

He swore suddenly, spurred his mount into even greater speed, went sweeping down the road to face the men whose leader he was, before irreparable damage was done to the minds of the others by the few hotheads still left in the clan.

The corral was milling with saddled horses when he turned his paint into the barn. He ripped off the saddle, gave the sweat-streaked paint a quick rubdown with a double-handful of straw. Then he was running toward the house, his heart thudding painfully in his chest, and his mind twisted with foreboding.

"We've been waiting for you, Rex," Trig Martin said from the porch edge. "As soon as the rest of the men get here, we're riding for the Loop L."

ALL emotion seemed drained from Rex Martin's face, leaving it blank except for the flare of his wide eyes. He came slowly up the steps, pushed by his uncle's restraining hand.

"Let's go in the house," he said slowly, "This isn't a matter for one man to settle."

Desultory talk ceased instantly as the two entered. The men filling the room shifted uneasily, some belligerently, some in evasive-eyed embarrassment. Rex Martin paused irresolutely at the doorway, his keen eyes scanning and evaluating every face within the room. Then he walked forward, braced his shoulders against the mantel.

"Nothing will be gained by a gun fight," he said calmly. "It will solve nothing."

"We're riding, Rex," Trig Martin said from the door. "There can't be two bosses of the valley, so we're going to make certain that we're the spread that stays as kingpin."

Rex Martin shook his head, feeling the dull futility within him, knowing he had to stop the useless horrible bloodshed that was coming.

"You can't do it!" he exploded tensely. "By God, as head of the Martins, I forbid it! John Fraker is in jail now, and the law will settle this affair."

There was a light moaning from the bedroom, and Trig Martin nodded toward it. "You hear that, Rex?" he asked flatly. "Your own flesh and blood is dying in there, shot down by a sneaking dry-gulcher —and you spout peace talk! By God, you're no head of the Martins to me; from now on, I follow nobody but myself!"

A light murmur of agreement raced over

the taut group like crackling flame through a canebrake. Rex Martin flinched from the condemnation he read in the men's eyes, wondered dully if Trig might not be right. Then resolve hardened in his mind, and he straightened lightly on his wide-braced feet.

"This is bigger than any of you think," he said swiftly, coldly. "This is no longer the frontier; that is pushing further Westward every day. The old law of gun against gun is about over, and the real Law is moving in. If we provoke a fight, the Governor will call out the militia to fight us—and we can't fight them and public opinion, too!" He paused, and then his voice gained power. "John Fraker is in Sundown's jail; I just took him there," he finished, "He'll swing for the shooting if Tommy dies. Let's wait until we know how the wind is blowing, before starting something too big for us to handle."

"You yellow skunk!" Trig Martin said passionately.

Rex Martin shook his head slowly, his grey eyes pain-filled.

"No," he denied quietly, "I'm not yellow; all of you men know that. I'm just trying to make you understand how stupid a pitched battle can be."

"We're riding, Rex," Trig Martin said slowly, his voice a flat deadly monotone.

"Is that right, men?" Rex Martin asked.

He went utterly cold at the nodding of the heads about the room, turned, went toward the door. There was an emptiness in him now that he knew showed on his face, and for a moment his anger blazed white-hot.

"You double-damned fools!" he snapped.

And then the door was closed behind him and he was running toward the barn. He worked feverishly for a moment, slinging his blanket and saddle on the great dun horse in the stall next to the paint's, cinching the saddle with a lithe strength that brought a protesting whinny from the nervously dancing dun.

He slipped to the saddle, had the horse in a flat run before he was out of the ranch yard. He heard the startled shouts from the men streaming from the house, and then their voices were swallowed in the night.

He took the road to Sundown, for he knew that there, and there alone, might lay the solution to the problem he faced. That solution lay in the stocky body of the man who had provoked the problem, the man whose guns had cut Tommy Martin down from drygulch—John Fraker!

Rex Martin swore bitterly, tiredly. It was a long shot he was taking, one that would probably peter out. But it had to be chanced—anything and everything had to be done to crush the fuse of hate that was even now burning toward the great store of explosive that was the accumulated hate of fifty years of senseless feuding and bloodshed.

CHAPTER VI

"I DON'T get it; I don't get it at all?" The Sheriff scratched his head puzzledly. "First you come in here and have me lock up John Fraker on the charge of shooting your brother; and now you want me to turn him loose? Can'tcha make up your mind?"

Rex Martin smiled tightly. "It was a mistake," he explained, "I don't want to keep an innocent man locked up."

"All right, if that's the way you want it!" The Sheriff twisted the key in the heavy padlock, opened the hasp. "Come on out, Fraker," he called, "Martin here just tore up the warrant."

John Fraker slid his feet from the bunk, blinked a trifle in the lamp-light. He came slowly to his feet, puzzlement in his eyes replaced by a quick wariness.

"What's the idea, Rex?" he asked, stepped through the doorway.

"Get your horse," Rex said shortly, "we're riding out to the Loop L."

"What for?"

"I'll explain as we ride." Rex lifted the gunbelt and twin guns. "You get your horse; I'll bring your guns when I come."

John Fraker shrugged, went through the rear door of the jail. Rex Martin watched him go, then turned to the Sheriff. "There's going to be shooting on the Loop L," he said swiftly, "John and I are going to try and stop it. You get a posse together and ride out just as soon as you can. But stay out of sight until I call for you. I don't want the sight of you and your men starting something that maybe I can avoid by talking."

"Hell!" the Sheriff said, "I thought you folks signed some sort of a peace pledge yesterday?"

"You get your men," Rex insisted.

"Maybe they won't be needed, then again they might."

"All right, if you say so." The Sheriff turned to buckle on his guns. "But I'm warning you Martin; if shooting starts—and I don't give a damn who starts it—I'm going to ask for help from the Governor. The people in this valley are tired of the feud you two camps insist on keeping alive."

"After tonight," Rex Martin promised slowly, "there won't be any feud."

He spun on one heel, went through the door, swung lithely into the dun's saddle. His mouth twisted cynically when he remembered his last words. No, there probably wouldn't be any feud by surprise—in all probability, there would be but one clan left.

"Let's ride," he said to John Fraker.

They pounded out of Sundown, taking the South fork, riding in silence for the first couple of miles. Then Fraker reined his horse, spoke as Rex Martin pulled the great dun.

"All right, Rex," he said shortly, "let's hear it?"

Rex Martin spoke swiftly then, not knowing the temper of the man at his side, only feeling the minutes passing with incredible speed.

"It's to be a fight," he said, "unless we can stop it. My men are probably at the Loop L now."

"But what can I do?" John Fraker's breathing was suddenly ragged.

"You can order your men not to fight. Even as vengeful as they are, my men won't cut down on yours in cold blood."

"If your men come gunning, I won't be able to stop mine."

"By God, you'll try, or I'll shoot you to death in your saddle." Rex Martin's words were clipped and brittle. "You started this, so you can stop it!"

John Fraker shrugged ruefully, leaned forward.

"You won't believe me," he said slowly, "but I'm telling you again that I didn't shoot Tommy and I don't know who did. But I'll do anything to kill this feud once and for all. Hell, I've fought and talked against it as much as you have—you know that! Give me my guns; I'll do what I can."

Rex Martin nodded without speaking, shaken by the driving intensity of the other's words. He handed over the looped gunbelt, twisted up a quirly as the other buckled on the guns.

THEN he leaned over, held out a bronzed hand.

"I believe you, John," he said simply.

His throat ached from the feeling that came from the strength of John Fraker's grip. For one long moment the two men smiled deep into each other's eyes, then touched spurs by common consent.

Thirty minutes later, they ground-hitched their steaming horses in the grove behind the corral, slipped quietly through the shadows toward the house. Their nerves were tense, expecting at any moment the blasting echoes of gunfire to race through the night. Ahead, shadows moved across the lighted windows of the house, and horses stirred restlessly along the front fence.

They crouched for a moment at the side of the house. "What shall we do?" Rex whispered, "It sounds as if half your men were already here, probably sent for by Mary when I took you into town. Do you want to face them alone, or shall I go along?"

"Maybe I'd better go in alone," John Fraker answered softly. "They might not listen, with you there to work up a rage against."

Rex nodded, followed the creeping shadow of the other along the house-side. He stopped, caught at Fraker's shoulder, when Bart Kingston's voice sounded from the partly opened window over their heads.

"I tell you men," Bart Kingston was saying, "that a fight with the Martins will bring the militia down on you within a week. You won't have a legal leg to stand on if you start looking for trouble."

"But what are we going to do?" Mary's voice sounded tiredly above the sullen rustle of voices. "It's obvious that John was taken to jail on a framed charge; we can't just remain idle while our enemies—"

"You're right, in your way of thinking," Kingston cut in smoothly, "and of course I can't control your actions. I'm just giving you the advice it's my duty to give. I talked with John in Sundown, and I'm convinced that he is being framed for shooting young Martin, but as I say, nothing can be gained by killing a few of the Martins. Some of them are bound to be left to testify against you."

Rex Martin frowned, strained to hear

every word. He felt a dull glow of resentment flaming against the lawyer, for he read a meaning into the words that the average person might miss. To him, it sounded as though the lawyer was inciting a murder frenzy in the minds of his listeners so that they would try to completely wipe out the Frakers.

"I don't like the way he's talking," he whispered to John Fraker.

John shook his head, his face puzzled in the faint light of the false dawn that streaked the sky with grey light. He scowled thoughtfully, scratched his chin with a calloused thumb.

"I don't either," he answered softly, "I told him to stop any gunplay that might come up; but it looks as though he was trying to start a fight."

"Listen!" Rex touched the other's shoulder for silence.

They pressed against the wall, straining to pick up the thread of the conversation again. They heard the rumble of a man's voice, then the flat staccato words of Kingston's answer.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly, "I'm John's lawyer, and it's my duty to protect the interests of my clients. If you decide to make a fight of it, I can't stop you. I, naturally, can't aid either side. But I can tell you this: you have a certain legality to fight if the Martins ride onto your land and provoke gunplay."

"Stop that fool!" Rex Martin snapped to John Fraker. "I think my men are riding and I don't want gunplay to start the minute they show up!"

"All right!" John Fraker straightened, went hurriedly toward the front of the house.

Rex Martin paced behind him, his nerves tight with dread of the bloody fight that might begin the moment the vengeful Martin men rode up to the house. He could not fully understand Kingston's part in the drama that was unfolding, but he felt that the lawyer was doing all in his power to incite a gun fight.

He and Fraker rounded the house corner, paced steadily toward the porch. The light was brighter now, the horizon red and gold with coming sunlight, and objects were losing their haziness and becoming clear-cut and distinct. A rooster crowed exultantly from the chicken yard, and the windmill creaked lazily in the light breeze.

They were just stepping onto the porch, their eyes intent on the front door that stood slightly open, when the rifle cracked flatly behind them and the glass dissolved in a front window.

"Come on out, you Frakers," Trig Martin roared in the instant silence following the shots. "This is the showdown you've been asking for! Come on out, and come a'shooting!"

CHAPTER VII

FOR ONE long incredulous moment, Rex Martin was paralyzed. He stood with one foot on the porch, his hand grasping the railing, and then his free hand clutched John Fraker's arm in a vise-like grip.

"Stop your men any way you can," he snapped, "I'm going to talk to mine."

"Right!" John Fraker said stiffly, went through the front door with a rush, his twin guns jutting from steady hands. "Hold it," he barked, "I'll run this show from here on out!"

Rex Martin whirled, lifted his voice in a ringing shout. "Trig," he called, "stop that damn-fool shooting!"

"What the hell you doing here, Rex?" Trig Martin stepped out of concealment from behind a heavy wagon, advanced warily into the open.

Rex Martin moved lithely away from the house, felt the cold prickling of the nerves in his shoulders at facing away from Fraker guns. His reason told him that John Fraker was probably the dry-gulcher whose guns had shot down Tommy, and even his instinctive trust of the man could not prevent an involuntary shudder. But his face was expressionless as he walked toward Trig Martin.

He halted fifty yards from the lean figure of his uncle, braced himself on wide-spread feet, his arms crooked a bit so that his hands were even with the worn butts of his guns.

"What the hell is the idea?" he asked tightly, "I thought you had more sense than this!"

Trig Martin laughed harshly. "Get out of my way, Rex," he said sharply, "or you'll get what the Frakers are going to get. Me and the boys are going to clean out these dry-gulchers once and for all."

There was something eerie in the sight of two Martin men facing one another in the greyness of the early morning, for it

was a thing the like of which the valley had never seen before. And the necessity of it brought a lump to Rex's throat.

"There's going to be no fighting," Rex Martin said coldly. "I'm still head of the Martins, and my orders still go."

"No!" Trig Martin's tones were flat and deadly. "You're not the Martin head any longer; we don't want a yellow-bellied coyote as our head."

Rex Martin fought the cold ball of rage in his mind, forced it into submission, leaving his mind absolutely emotionless and his reasoning crystal-clear.

"John," he called, "is everything under control?"

"Go ahead, Rex," John Fraker called loudly, "my men won't start anything."

"Come out here in the open," Rex snapped, his eyes swinging swiftly about the yard, singling out every hiding place that might conceal one of his men.

"Stay where you are," Trig Martin counter-ordered savagely, "Rex isn't a Martin any more; he's thrown in with the Frakers."

He cursed bitterly when his orders were ignored and the men came cautiously out of concealment. His guns lifted a bit, centered on Rex Martin's lithe figure, and for a split second his fingers tightened on the triggers. Then the moment was past, and Rex had the complete attention of all his men.

"Men," Rex said brittlely, "there isn't going to be a gunfight; that wouldn't solve a damned thing. We're going to let the courts settle this thing. John Fraker says he didn't shoot Tommy, and I believe him. But we're not going to prove or disprove his guilt by fighting it out like a pack of wolves; we're going to let the Law do that for us."

Trig Martin spat disdainfully. "Tommy's unconscious back home," he said bitterly. "The Doc says he will die without coming to. All the talking in the world ain't going to stop this thing. The minute the Doc shows up with the news that the boy is dead, me and the boys are going to finish what a Fraker started fifty years ago."

Rex Martin felt the futility of the situation beating at him in gigantic waves. He knew that he couldn't hold the Martin men much longer, for he could see that more than half of them agreed with Trig Martin's words. He tried desperately to think of something that would stop the inevitable gunplay, and his thinking ran into a stone wall.

He knew that this was a crisis of much greater portent than he could possible convey by mere words; it was something so big that he felt infinitesimally small beside its stature. But he could not find the words or expression to explain his thoughts and emotions.

THE men he faced were of the old West, that of flaming guns and ruthless methods, and they could not fully understand that a new civilization was arising that could be governed only by a majority vote. He had seen that civilization enroaching its way Westward, stopping for neither natural nor man-made barriers, always going forward to make a country where there were no boundaries as there were in foreign lands. He had tried to give that message to his men, but without success.

And now, as he stood in silent thought, his body tense for the action that might flare momentarily, he saw his men fade back into concealment at a tiny flick of his uncle's guns, and saw the vengeful old man take a slow step forward.

The faint echo of a shot came from the road.

"That's the Doc," Trig Martin said, "and that means that Tommy's dead." He came forward slowly.

"Don't try it, Trig," Rex Martin said quietly, "it's too big for you to handle. Because, if you take another step, you'll be fighting me as well as the Frakers."

"To hell with you!" he screamed, and pulled both triggers.

CHAPTER VIII

TRIG MARTIN'S guns lipped long spears of flame and smoke, and then the crashing echoes of the shots reverberated in the air. He stood, half-crouched, his legs widespread, the guns bucking and jumping in his hands.

But the first two bullets missed Rex. He went twisting to one side, his hands flashing like darting snakes' heads, his fingers closing about the worn gun butts. He

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had the guns out, was lifting them with incredible speed, when the third slug slammed into his hip and sent him into a sprawling crouch.

He fired then, his long fingers tight on the dead triggers, his thumbs fanning the hammers with a steady movement that blurred the shots into each other. A second slug hammered at his left arm, whirled him completely around, but as he spun to the ground he emptied his right-hand gun.

He fell then into the dust, expecting a final slug to reach him at any moment. Blackness tugged at his brain, and the ground was suddenly unstable and shifting beneath his good arm as he forced himself partly erect.

Trig Martin was falling then, incredulous amazement on his face, his gun-filled hands lifting with an agonized slowness toward his blood nephew who had shot with uncanny accuracy. He coughed lightly in his throat, and a bloody froth touched his lips. Then the guns fell from his hands, and he crumpled slowly, his fingers plucking aimlessly at his bloody shirt.

For a long moment, he fought death there on the stained earth, and then fleeing life left his body slack on the ground.

The next few moments were hazy to Rex Martin. He knew only that John Fraker was at his side, aiding him with gentle hands, making himself a clear target for the guns of the hidden Martin men.

And then he felt the competent deft touch of the doctor's hands, and some of the pain left his body. He gagged a bit on the hot liquor the doctor tilted from a bottle, and then some of the blackness left his mind.

"Rex?" the doctor said softly, "Rex, can you understand me?"

Rex Martin nodded slightly, winced as pain flooded from his shattered hip and arm. He took another drink, blinked a trifle dazedly into the physician's patient face.

"Had to do it, Doc," he whispered. "Had to do it."

The doctor nodded. "I suppose so, Lad," he said, "I tried to stop it, but I got here too late."

Rex sat up, helped by the friendly hands of the doctor and John Fraker. He winced a trifle in pain, glanced out. Mary and Kingston stood to one side, backed by the Fraker men; and a few yards away were

the Martins, their faces white and strained by the sight of the gunfight between two Martins a few moments before.

"Tommy's dead?" Rex asked dully.

The doctor shook his head. "No, he'll live," he said. "That's what I came to tell you. I got his complete story, when he became conscious for a short while."

He stopped for a moment, his pale eyes drifting about the group.

"John Fraker didn't shoot him," he continued, "Trig Martin did that."

"Trig?" Rex said incredulously.

"Yes. Trig and a band of beefers were cutting out some of the Martin cattle. He tried to stop them, and was shot. He was conscious only long enough to see John Fraker riding away for help."

"Oh, John!" Mary was crying softly then, held tightly in her brother's arms.

"Who were the rest of the men?" Rex asked.

HE followed the line of the doctor's gaze, and went cold at the malevolent hate he saw in Bart Kingston's eyes.

Kingston stepped away, twin guns leaping into his hands from under-arm hold-outs, their muzzles swinging menacingly so as to cover the entire group as he backed toward the hitching rail.

"Jim, Frank, Bill," he called gently, "get your horses." His right hand gun shifted, lined up with John Fraker's chest as the stocky rancher swung slowly. "Don't try it, John," he said brittlely, "I can't be hanged any higher for shooting you down than I can for rustling."

"Why?" John Fraker asked.

Bart Kingston laughed harshly, watched as his three men raced toward the horses. "Trig figured it out," he explained, "I was to do the dickering with the Eastern companies, and he was to create a final fight between the Martins and the Frakers. I guess he hated the Frakers, too, but he wanted to control the valley himself. We rustled the Martin stock, sold some of it, and turned the rest onto the Fraker spread in the arroyos at the north of the valley. Then this peace talk came up, and we knew we had to work fast. The boy caught us beefing the cattle last night, and got shot by mistake when he wasn't recognized. We thought he was dead, and left him to be found. It was lucky for us that he saw John Fraker ride off, for it gave us the perfect opening to start the feud again. But the payoff wasn't what we thought it would be."

"Come on, Kingston," Frank called from the hitching rail.

"The Frakers were to be driven out," Kingston said, ignoring the calling of his henchman. "Rex and some of the leading Martins were to be killed. Then Trig and I would rule the roost around here." He scowled viciously. "Then you," he said to Rex, "had to let your damned scruples and morals stick you in the middle of the play. I owe you something for that!"

His forefinger tightened on the trigger of his left-hand gun. Rex Martin braced himself, his unwounded right arm darting toward the half-empty gun lying in the dust at his side. But he knew that he could never reach it in time to save himself.

And then Bart Kingston jerked in agony, his right leg crumpling beneath his weight. Almost instantly there was the flat crack of a rifle shot in the air. His guns roared in instinctive reflex, and then he was dead, blown backward by John Fraker's guns which he had drawn in one fluid stabbing movement of his hands.

The Sheriff scrambled from cover, raced toward the stricken group, followed by a dozen men of his posse. He swung the muzzle in an all-inclusive gesture.

"No one makes a move for a gun," he said clearly.

Rex Martin grinned from the depths of the great feather mattress at John and Mary Fraker. His hip and arm throbbed in long waves of pain, but he winked and gestured unashamedly toward the door.

"Surely there's something you can find to do outside, John?" he said.

"Sure, Rex," John Fraker answered, laughed openly at the blush on Mary's cheeks. Then he was gone through the doorway, his ringing laughter still echoing in the room.

"Nurse," Rex Martin said, "I thought the Martin-Fraker feud was over, but I guess it's going to break out again." He smiled away the quick alarm in her eyes.

"This time, though," he said, "I think the feud will be a family affair."

And then she was held by his good arm, her tears warm on his cheek and her lips warm on his.

THE END

HOLD-UP BY APPOINTMENT

By Prentice M. Thomas

Jeff Reid could handle those cardsharps and stage bandits with utter contempt for their six-guns, because a man in the latter stages of TB isn't afraid of sudden death!

THE bat doors of the Shenandoah saloon opened slowly, and the stranger slipped unobtrusively inside and stood against the wall. No one among the miners noticed him, for there was nothing distinctive about him. Only Doc Turner, standing with his back to the bar, one heel hooked over the foot rail, paid any attention to him. But even through the saloon atmosphere, heavy with liquor and tobacco smoke, the sotty eyes of the doctor detected the unnatural brilliance of the stranger's eyes and the unhealthy ruddiness of his thin face.

"Uh," Doc Turner grunted. "Virginia City ain't no place for a consumptive."

He watched the stranger make his way slowly across the floor to the bar. Though absorbed in the sure symptoms which marked the stranger a dying man, the doctor did not fail to note the easy, sure movements of the stranger's slender body, nor the heavy .45 slung on his right hip. He made room for him at the bar.

"New in Virginia City, ain't you?" he asked. "I'm Doc Turner."

"Yeah," the stranger said, turning feverish gray eyes upon the doctor. "I'm Jeff Reid."

"Reid?" Turner repeated. "Reid. Sounds familiar."

"Mebbe you remember Joe Reid."

"The stage driver," Turner recalled quickly. "Killed in a hold-up between here and Bannack."

"That's right," Reid said softly. "I'm his brother."

Doc Turner looked at the stranger with renewed interest, but before he could speak again an uproar began at the poker table.

"Yuh dirty, thievin' cheat!" a bull

voice roared above the noise of the miners revelling in the saloon. "Think you can deal offen th' bottom tuh Bull Morton?"

Reid's head came up with a snap. He threw a glance at the poker table in time to see a huge, tough-looking man come to his feet. Bull Morton clawed at the gun on his hip. Three shattering roars beat through the Shenandoah, and the poker dealer folded up in his chair and slumped over on the table.

A few small squeaks came from the saloon girls, and Reid heard a few miners cursing softly. Two bouncers moved nonchalantly over to the poker table and picked up the dealer's body. Swiftly the regular tempo of life in the Shenandoah was resumed.

Jeff Reid pushed away from the bar. "Guess that's the job I'm lookin' for," he said. "See you around, Doc."

Instinctively Doc Turner put out a hand to stop him, then with a shrug he let it drop.

Reid walked leisurely through the crowd to the poker table. Ezra Willet, proprietor of the Shenandoah, was scooping up the house's chips.

"But I tell yuh, Ezra," Bull Morton was arguing, "I seen 'im pull that card offen th' bottom. I'd kill my own brother if I caught 'im tryin' tuh cheat me."

"Leave 'em, Ezra," Reid said calmly. "I'll deal."

Willet looked sharply at the thin face of the sick man. Bull Morton gave one look and laughed loudly.

"Who're you?" Willet asked.

"The new dealer," Reid said. He looked steadily at Morton and took a seat in the chair from which the dead man had just been removed. "Think your luck is still holdin'?" he asked Morton.

Morton laughed again and straightened up in his chair. Ezra Willet left the chips and for a moment stood over the table watching Reid deal the first hand.

Morton lost steadily. The stacks of chips in front of the other three players grew steadily, but Morton played out and bought more chips. As his money dwindled his temper became sullen and ugly.

"You can't win," Reid said softly. "I can deal any card in the deck, and do it so slick you'll never see it. If you stay here long enough I'll have your breeches."

"Shut up an' deal," Morton growled.

"You're a marked man, Morton," Reid taunted. "I left the hospital to find the man who killed my brother. You don't know me, do you, Morton?"

"Shut up, I tell yuh!" Morton bellowed.

"My name's Reid. Joe Reid's brother."

Jeff's eyes were upon Morton, feverish, condemning. The savage joy he felt at punishing the murderer of his brother showed in his face. His thin, blood-stained lips moved in a smile.

For a moment stark fear showed in Morton's face. Then he flushed and tore his eyes away from the accusing stare of Reid.

"Deal th' cards," he said sullenly. "I don't know what yuh're talkin' about."

Reid laughed softly. "You ought not be afraid to die, Morton. You've sent plenty others to their death. An eye for an eye, you know. Now take me, I know I'll never get out of Virginia City alive. When I kill you, some of your thugging buddies will knock me off. Yet, I'm going to kill you."

MORTON stared speechlessly at the sick man who talked so calmly of death. He he been a well man, Morton would not have hesitated. But somehow Reid's eyes held him. There was something at work here besides men and guns, and Morton was helpless before it.

"Get ready to draw, Morton," Reid said, laughing. "Here comes a trey from the middle of the deck for you, and an ace from the bottom for the next player."

Deliberately Reid slowed his deal so that Morton could plainly see the crooked deal. He flipped the two cards across the table and watched Morton.

For a moment the huge man stared at the back of his card. His breath came heavily, lifting his chest. Slowly he turned the card. The trey of diamonds was revealed.

With a sudden bellow of rage, Bull Morton sprang to his feet, shoving the table toward Reid. The table overturned, dumping chips and cards in Reid's lap and around his feet. Morton clawed for his gun.

Reid remained sitting. As Morton's gun cleared leather, Reid spoke softly. "I wouldn't try that if I were you, Morton. I don't want to kill you here."

Morton looked down the barrel of Reid's .45. The feverish eyes above it were now as cold as the steel of the gun muzzle. Morton let his rod slide back into the holster.

"I'm driving the stage to Bannack tomorrow," Reid said. "The same one my brother was killed on. There will be five thousand dollars worth of gold dust on it. I'll expect you at Nevada Gulch, the same place you killed Joe."

The noise and movement around the poker table had stopped, and now the unusual inactivity spread over the whole saloon. In a moment every eye in the joint was trained on the quiet tableau at the poker table. Doc Turner moved silently down the bar and stood behind Reid's chair to forestall his being shot in the back by one of Morton's cronies.

Morton stood dead still, staring at Reid's cold eyes, his body still crouched and his arms bent for the draw Reid had stopped.

"Set the table right and pick up the cards and chips," Reid said quietly.

Morton's fingers trembled above his holstered gun. For a moment his face worked with rage and indecision. Then he dropped his hand and set the poker table back aright.

Humiliation ate at Morton as he knelt at Reid's feet to recover the cards and chips. Reid remained sitting, forcing Morton to raise up and walk around the table to get the cards and chips on the other side of him.

"Now push your chair up and get out," Reid ordered. "The stage will be at Nevada Gulch two hours after sunup. I'll expect you."

A short fit of coughing struck him as he watched Bull Morton stamp toward the bat doors of the Shenandoah. He covered his mouth with a stained handkerchief and kept his

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eyes and gun trained upon Morton. When the doors swung shut after the big man, he rose and motioned for Ezra Willett.

"Thanks, Ezra," he said. "I didn't win much money for you, but at least I got rid of Morton for you."

Doc Turner took Reid's arm. "Let me buy you a drink. That was a neat trick you turned." At the bar he said, "You're not really going to drive that stage, are you?"

Reid laughed lightly. "Guess I am."

"You'll never reach Bannack."

"Not figuring to."

Turner regarded him quizzically. "Why do you want to die like that?"

"It's better than the hospital, isn't it?"

An hour after sunup the next morning the stage to Bannack was jolting and rocking over the rough road. In the driver's seat the thin, wasted figure of Jeff Reid swayed with the heavy coach.

At Brown's ranch he pulled up and told his three passengers to get out. Calling Henry Brown to one side, Reid talked to him a few minutes. Then Brown went into the house and brought out a battered old suitcase. After herding the three passengers into the house, Brown and Reid removed the gold pokes from the stage company's box and placed them in the suitcase.

Waving his hand to Brown, Reid drove on. As soon as he was out of sight of the ranchhouse, he filled the poke box with something from a cloth sack which he had kept concealed under a blanket. As the horses raced on, he inspected his .45 to see that it was ready for use.

He had credited Bull Morton with being something of a dullard who thought he was very crafty. With that in mind, he figured Morton

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AT ALL STANDS

would try to outsmart him. He would hold up the stage, but not at Nevada Gulch. Jeff kept his eyes sharp on the road ahead.

A savage sense of joy beat in his chest. The atmosphere and inactivity of the hospital had almost suffocated him. This was the life he wanted—fast, furious, dangerous. He had always envied Joe his robust health and adventurous spirit. Now, to avenge Joe's murder, he was getting a taste of it—and liking it.

AT Ford's branch Morton and his gang struck. Jeff saw them sweep out of the wadi half a mile ahead and race toward him. There were three besides Morton. So bold had the road agents become that they didn't bother to mask themselves. Jeff had no trouble recognizing Morton. He rode ahead of the others, a cruel grin on his face.

Jeff drew up and waited. The .45 on his hip remained untouched. He watched the riders approach, a slight smile on his thin lips.

"I don't see how you've lived this long, Morton," he said calmly, when the riders halted near him. 'You did precisely what I thought you'd do."

"Cut out the talk," Morton demanded, waving his gun at Reid. "Throw down the gold, and then I'm goin' tuh kill yuh."

"Right," Jeff said cheerfully.

"Where's yer passengers?" one of the others demanded.

"Brown's ranch."

Jeff reached behind the driver's seat to the luggage rack and picked up the poke box. His eyes became suddenly cold, and his lips drew together in a tight line. Bracing himself, he heaved the box as far from the stage as he could. Then he tensed his arm for the draw.

The box landed on the ground between Morton and one of the other road agents. The instant it struck a tremendous explosion deafened Jeff. He felt the air rush past him and sand sting his face. As the stage horses leaped forward wildly, he saw Morton and the other agent tumble from the saddle.

The explosion of the dynamite rattled the other agents, and for a moment their horses ran aimlessly forward. Then they gathered their wits and took out after the coach.

Jeff picked up the lines and jerked the frightened horses back under control. Sweeping off the road in a wide circle, he headed the stage back toward the pursuing road agents. They left the road, one on each side, and opened fire. Bullets sang past Jeff's ear.

Clutching his .45, he aimed carefully at one of the agents. A tremor ran up his arm as the gun bucked. The agent fell from the saddle.

The last of the toughs pulled his mount aside and raced for the wadi of Ford's branch. Jeff's .45 roared again. The riderless horse swept on into the wadi.

The stage slowed down. Jeff walked the horses past the bodies of Bull Morton and his crony and their horses.

His passengers were waiting at Brown's ranch. Also the gold. A series of short coughs gripped him, but it soon passed. Morton had partners in Bannack. Maybe one of them would get him. If not, maybe he would live to have another drink with Doc Turner, or deal another hand for Ezra Willet.

Anyway, this was better than the hospital. A gay snatch of song burst from his stained lips as he hazed the horses into a run.

THE END

THE PILGRIM WAS A FOX

By Stephen Payne

"Boys," says Hub Drexel, "that buyer I'm expectin', Jim Alexander, should show up tomorrow or next day at latest. Now pin back your ears, all o' you — no pranks. No practical jokes at 11. You savvy?" We savvy, and tell him so; we'll lay off — and then in comes this pilgrim . . .

WITH a "Hi-yippe-yip!" and "Roll along dogies!" us 7 L rannies haze nigh onto a thousand young steers into the pasture and let 'em scatter out to graze. Foreman Hub Drexel steps down from his saddle to close the gate, remarkin':

"No more night herdin', boys, and only one more circle. Tomorrow we'll ride this neck of the woods and then the roundup's over!"

After havin' been out for three weeks followin' the old 7 L wagon, makin' two circles a day and a night herdin' every night, we can be excused for feelin' jubilant now the job's practically over. So we let out a few rousin' whoops, and somebody busts into song as we race over to the grub wagon. It's drawn up alongside a dancin' little creek with a yellow-leafed aspen grove in the background to make the camp sorta doggoned pretty.

Hoss-Jingler Joe has got his cavvy in that pasture all same as the cattle, and now all he has to do is drive through the gate the broncs we've been forkin', then amuse himself. No

nighthawkin'. Everything'll sure be hunky with the hull bunch of us if only Charlie Dinsmore, the old man, fetches out a cattle buyer from town. He'd left us early this mornin' to see couldn't he locate one o' the species in Ox Grove.

Well, soon after we've hit camp the boss rides in, alone, and immediately calls all hands to gather 'round him for he has somethin' important to say.

"Boys, that buyer I'm expectin', Jim Alexander, should show up tomorrow or next day at the latest. Now pin back your ears, all o' you," and ol' Charlie turns plumb around to stab my side partner, Nevada Red, with his eyes. "No pranks. No practical jokes at all. You savvy?" talkin' to Nevada. "Some of you birds'd put up a job on the president if he was to show himself 'round here. But lay off this cattle buyer. I don't know the man personally, but some of 'em are touchy, and I can't take chances of any of you cheerful idiots queerin' a sale."

Aside to me, Nevada Red whispers, "Cotton Top, you be careful. The boss was serious."

"Ye-ah?" says I. "The first step toward bein' careful would be to ditch you and start bunkin' with some sensible waddy....I seem to kinda sharply remember—"

"I s'pose t'was associatin' with me turned your hair white, Cotton?"

Nevada knows better'n that. My forelook changed color in just one night some four years ago when I got mistaken for a hoss thief. The noose was snug 'round my gullet and 'tother end of that rope was up over a cottonwood limb when nobody but this same Nevada Red showed up and talked seven ringy cowpunchers outa the pleasant idea they had of leavin' me to dance on thin air.

AFTER that 'twas kinda natural I'd throw in with the slab-shouldered, redheaded galoot. Yet, doggone his picture, he keeps tellin' me to this day he ain't nowise sure them cowpunchers was makin' a mistake. Howsoever, disregardin' our personal argyments, we've stuck together right faithful, and we've been forkin' 7 L hosses now for three full years—without pay. Why? 'Cause Charlie Dinsmore is so hard-up and mortgage-ridden he has jus' barely been able to keep the outfit together. But when he sells this bunch of yearlings things will be different.

Uh-huh. Us rannies'll get to trail the dogies to town and put wheels under 'em; Charlie'll get a real wad of dough, enough to satisfy his creditors and to pay us our back wages. Consequent there ain't a ranny with the old 7 L wagon but what wants to see them yearlin's sold and for a top figure, too. Us hooraw the buyer or play pranks on him? Heck, the boss needn't ha' warned us to lay off. Still you never can tell what that side pard of mine'll do. He has now sidled up to old Charlie and is askin',

"You see anything of my friend Allan Parks in Ox Grove?"

Charlie says he wouldn't know Allan Parks if he had seen him. Was Nevada expectin' this jasper and if so why was he expectin' him?

"He writ me he was a-headin' this way," Nevada explains, "and he's shore one interestin' cuss I'd like for you boys to meet. Maybe that's him driftin' in now."

In just a minute though Nevada wiggles his head on its long neck and mutters to me, "That ain't Allan

Parks. It's—Hi-gosh! It's a pilgrim!"

The newcomer has a hoss under him and said hoss is the onliest thing about his get-up as don't look like it had come straight from a mail order catalog. His saddle, bridle, rope, slicker and everything he's wearin' is brand spankin' new. Uh-huh, and his clothes holler "greenhorn" louder'n any coyote can yelp. Yet the jigger himself is a well-set-up feller maybe thirty years old, with a pair of shoulders on him like a Clyde work hoss. Not too much girth 'round the waistline neither.

He sits in his squeakin' saddle like he don't belong there and he pulls up his hoss like he don't know how, then real polite he asks for the ramrod of the spread.

"I guess you mean my wagon boss, Hub Drexel," says old Charlie after recoverin' from his amazement. He indicates a lanky old cowman who looks like a Texas steer offen the short-grass range. Hub runs to legs and he's got a kinda rawhide look like he'd been exposed to the sun without no moisture for a long, long spell.

"However I happen to own this 7 L," ol' Charlie goes on. "So—"

"How do you do?" says Mister Mail Order Pilgrim. "I want a job. I know you'll think I'm green, but I want to learn the ropes."

"Humph,!" snorts ol' Charlie. "I was expectin' a cattle buyer, but sure as mules kick you ain't him. How come you strayed so far from town without nobody ridin' close herd on you?"

The greenhorn explains he had bought his outfit in Omaha, and got off a train at Ox Grove where he bought the hoss he's usin'. "Next I made inquiries as to where I might find a real roundup outfit and here I am. I'll work for my keep, or I'll even pay board if you'll let me stay with your wagon, sir."

"What about it, Hub?" Charlie turns to the foreman.

"All right, let him stay," says Hub, kinda weary 'cause I guess he does get fed up plenty on the pranks some of these rannies are always pullin' off. Hub squinted his eyes at Nevada Red and went on, "All right, greenhorn, stick around. But I kinda think you'll wish you hadn't."

I'VE got that same idea ridin' me fierce, for this mail-order tenderfoot ain't got no protection from the boss like a cattle buyer'd have. The bars are down so far as this stray pilgrim is concerned and—Well, already Nevada Red has whooped:

"Aich-you-boy! Powder River!"

This causes Pilgrim to look scairt. "Is the man intoxicated?" he inquires.

"No," says Hub. "The bats are somethin' terrible out here, Mister, and that redheaded idiot has got a lot of 'em roostin' in his belfry. Don't pay no attention to him."

Just then old Tallow-and-Hardtack hollers, "Hot stuff! Come and get it."

So we make a run on the coffee pot and Dutch Ovens by the fire and load up with our pot-rastler's he-man grub. Doesn't that nickname, Tallow-and-Hardtack, sort of give you a hint? Nobody but a he-man could eat the truck. His beefsteak or fried liver or what-have-you is always a-swimmin' in beef tallow, which same coats your gums, your teeth, your lips and your tongue. But you can sorta rub it off with one of them things T & H mistakenly calls a biscuit. Grind one of them 'round

in your mouth for a spell and it'll take even the enamel off your teeth. That is, if you got the strength in your jaws to crack one of 'em open to start the grindin'. Tallow-and-Hardtack is the plumb best grub spoiler ever I seen.

Well, the supper call saves Pilgrim from gettin' put onto a "plumb gentle hoss" or somethin' of the kind t'oncet, and after supper, Squinty Dugan starts a crap game. This draws Nevada Red like a magnet. Uh-huh. I bet-cha that feller can smell a poker game or a crap game four miles off and over a steep hogback t'boot. In just a jiffy Nevada's hunkered down on a saddle blanket, rollin' the bones and talkin' to 'em. The boys ain't no rea. money so they gamble for I O U's, for jackknives, chaps, spurs, bits, ropes, saddle strings—anything.

Furthermore, now there ain't no nightherdin' to do with the yearlin's in a pasture, they go at the game with a heap of zest and this saves Pilgrim for the time bein'. He sets on a bed roll beside old Charlie Dinsmore, watchin' 'em and askin' questions. I shore prick up my ears when I hear the old man tellin' this greenhorn:

"I run she stock and raise cattle here on my range. Sell my dry cows every year, if they're fat, and sell off my steers as yearlings. Never keep 'em longer if I can help it. Turnin' 'em young gives me more grass for my cow herd, if you savvy?"

Pilgrim says, "Ah?" which, come to think about it, ain't neither "Yes" nor "No" and might mean anything.

Charlie goes on, "We've got right close at a thousand head of yearling steers to sell now. We'll make another circle tomorrow and gather a few more."

"Ah? What is a circle and how do you make it?"

Ol' Charlie ignores this. "Of course we've got quite a batch of short yearlings in the herd; and quite a mess of scrubby two-year-olds, the cut-backs from last year, too. A smart buyer'll spot all them short yearlings and either make me cut 'em out or refuse to pay the same price for 'em he'll pay for the full age stuff."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Dinsmore, what's a fair price? Or putting it another way, how much do you get?"

NEVADA RED has lost the dice temporarily so he looks up to say, "Seventy-five dollars a head. No cut-backs."

This brings a grunt from old Charlie. "Pay no attention to that waddy," he remarks to Pilgrim. "He's the biggest liar on the range, bar none. This year I hope to get thirty dollars for my top yearlings and about twenty-five for those that aren't quite old enough—the short yearlings, we call 'em. Those cut-back two's won't bring more'n thirty."

"And will a buyer cut back some this year?" asks Pilgrim adding, "Whatever that means."

"Sure. Ten percent is the usual cut. But believe me, stranger, there are tricks in all trades and the cow business is no exception. I'll beef and holler that I'm bein' robbed and I'll hold out for thirty-five dollars a head for the bunch as they run, no cut at all, doin' my darndest to convince that cattle buyer—wonder when he's comin'?—I won't take a penny less."

"Most interesting," says Pilgrim. "Now tell me, what is a yearling?"

At that I snort out loud. Gee-gollickers, that goof hadn't orter have strayed away from home; not alone, anyhow.

Cuttin' a long story short, just 'cause of the crap game and 'cause he's talkin' to the boss, Pilgrim escapes any serious pranks that night. But come daylight, with everybody rollin' out, he can't find his clothes and Nevada sorta convinces him a pack rat stole 'em. Them pack rats can carry an unheard-of load and they travel far in one short night, too. Chances are this one has drifted thirty-odd miles away and we'll never be able to trail him.

Nevada Red, however, is real helpful. He's got a pair of extra overalls to cover Pilgrim's legs and he can drape a blanket 'round his naked torso.

Nevada is also powerful accommodatin' in the matter of a mount for the stranger in our camp. Nevada Red has a swelligant, easy-gaited pony he'd admire to have Pilgrim use on the mornin's circle. It don't occur to Nevada nor to nobody else to mention one peculiar habit of this swelligant pony: the habit of comin' undone at the most unexpected times, when hoss and rider are all alone and off forty-'leven miles from no place, leavin' said rider to hold down a sagebrush or a cactus while the hoss skylights himself on a hill headin' for camp in a hurry.

Pilgrim swallers the bait, hook, line and sinker, and wearin' his blanket in place of a shirt he rides with the boys far back up yonder into them kinda woodsy hills where the country breaks up and gets choppy. Real darned rough, too. There this particular bunch of circle riders split up, each to prowl off down a ridge or gully and whoop the half-wild cattle out o' the brakes to open country and then on to the bunch ground.

'Twas a big circle, takin' most of the day. But I'd got in with my drive by three o'clock so I was one of the boys to see Nevada's pet hoss come high-tailin' to camp friskin' like a colt and laughin', hoss fashion, over what he'd done. Pilgrim was afoot somewheres back in the hills fourteen miles from camp in his blanket and his new tight boots, for the "pack rat" had left him the boots.

Nevada showed up after a while; so did the rest of the boys, everybody laughing and hoorawin' 'bout what a swelligant 'nitiation that greenhorn was gettin', and would he be mad and sore-footed and sunburnt by the time he hoofed it in. Everybody was tickled 'cept the boss, who wasn't there. Charlie Dinsmore had rid to Ox Grove once again to see if he could locate his buyer.

We settled down to business and worked the herd, cuttin' out all the yearling steers and a lot of short ages and cut-back two's besides. We got this cut shoved in the pasture when just a-foggin' here come old Charlie. One look at him showed us somethin' was sure a-bitin' on the old man.

DASHIN' up to us, he skids his hoss to stop. "Hub, where's Mr. Alexander?"

"Who in hell you mean?" asks Hub.

"That's his name. The name of that Pilgrim. Boys, he's my cattle buyer!"

If ever you seen a bunch of riders stunned like lightnin' had hit within ten feet of 'em 'twas us. The boss goes on, sort o' tight lipped and grim, " 'Twas just by accident I learned who he was and how he had ridden

out last night to find the 7 L roundup. Where is he now?"

All at once ol' Charlie remembers somethin'. He hips around in his saddle and glares skinnin' knives at Nevada Red. "Damn you, Red, you put that man up on old Snake Eyes to ride circle. And I'd told you boys to lay off my cattle buyer. Now he won't buy a hoof. Nevada, you're fired! Get your own hoss and git. Git outa my sight."

Nevada opens his ear-to-ear mouth and shuts it again. He knows better'n to argue with the boss when Charlie's so darned mad he's bitin' himself. Hub puts in a word for the boys.

"But none of us knowed this tenderfoot-lookin' jigger was the buyer."

"But you should ha' known," spits ol' Charlie, plain unreasonable. "Nevada, get goin'. The rest of you, rope fresh horses, lope out and comb the hills for Mr. James Alexander. Rattle your hocks. I'll be along. Chances are that poor feller is lost."

I get a word with Nevada before, without makin' no argument, he starts for town fired and disgraced. "You've had it comin' a heap of times afore this," says I. "But this time 'twasn't quite fair of the boss."

Nevada shrugs. "Fair or not, I got my walkin' papers. You s'pose it'll ever occur to ol' Charlie Dinsmore how that smart gazoob was really puttin' somethin' over on him as well as on us?"

"Huh? Huh?" I stammers. Then all of a suddent I see Nevada's point. Yep, Mister James Alexander was playin' just as mean a trick on the 7 L—if not a heap of a sight lower down and meaner—than Nevada Red had played on him. That smart-alec cattle buyer had come to our roundup pretendin' to be somethin' he wasn't just to get the inside dope on how much Charlie Dinsmore would take for the yearlings!

"You catch on, Cotton Top, I see," says Nevada. "And it's plenty good enough for the old man, after what he's done to me. Still, he's powerful hard up and he ain't paid me off though he's fired me. It just may be I'll do somethin' to upset Pilgrim's applecart yet."

"What, Nevada?"

He might have told me, but just then the ol' man sighted us a confabbin' and yelled at me to get a wiggle on. The man-hunt was startin'. All of us 'cept Nevada Red rid back into the rough, choppy hills where Snake Eyes had lost his pack and began firin' shots and "helloing" all over the whole danged country.

We rid the night long, back and forth and up and down all the ridges and gulches, prowling every bog hole and every patch of timber and every rock pile. But never a sound outa the lost Pilgrim cattle buyer. Never sight of hide nor hair of him did we see.

We'd had no dinner nor no supper and the boss was nigh locoed, yet not much goofier or madder'n most of the rest of us, me particular. If that smart hombre who thunk he was puttin' somethin' over on the 7 L was lost he could stay lost so far as I was concerned. I headed for camp at crack of day an' soon old Charlie himself caught up with me. He was lookin' down his nose, his face longer'n a well rope. Consequent, though I was all primed to tell him a few things in defense of Nevada Red, I sed nothin'.

"LOOK!" I yelps when we come in sight of the wagon. "There's somebody to camp. Some-

body besides the hoss jingler and old Tallow-and-Hardtack."

Me and ol' Charlie prod our tired nags, dash on to the chuck-wagon, where gobblin' up his breakfast, is the missin' Pilgrim. He has found his clothes what the pack rat took away and is wearin' 'em. Furthermore he looks bright and chipper and sassy—maybe insolent 'd be a better word.

Ol' Charlie falls out his saddle, tuckered from the night ride and from worry. "Thank God!" he says slow and meaningful. "Mr. Alexander, I see you did find your way back to camp. But how'd it happen we didn't run into you?"

Says the Pilgrim, so smug I just ache to punch his snout, "I hid in the brush and let you wise jaspers start hunting for me. Figured that'd be a good joke on your cowboys, Mr. Dinsmore, though I'd been laughing up my sleeve at them all the time I'd been on this roundup."

"I see," says the old man, his lips kinda white and his eyes holdin' that peculiar gleam which tells me he's holdin' onto his temper though he's madder'n a hornet. "Where'd you spend the night, Mr. Alexander?"

"Here in camp in a comfortable bed," Pilgrim informs with a chuckle. "Your grub spoiler didn't find me until half an hour ago. About that plumb gentle horse your redheaded prankster palmed off on me: I was hep all the time to what was what. But I allowed it would be a terrible shock to all the cowpunchers, particularly Nevada Red, if I rode to camp, so I turned the nag loose and—Did you have a pleasant night hunting for me? Do hope your punchers enjoyed it."

"They shore did," I mutters sour.

Old Charlie shuffles to the chuck wagon, slow and jaded and sorta all down in the dumps. "Fire three shots to bring the boys in, Cotton Top," he tells me. "Well, I'll feel better after I eat. Then we'll look at the yearlings, Mr. Alexander."

In due course the rannies lope to camp and when they learn how Mr. James Alexander has plumb outwitted us none of 'em do any noticeable rejoicin', though old Hub Drexel opines sorta dry, "I reckon we had it comin'. 'Nuff sed."

Howsomever I draw four-five of the waddies to one side for a confab. "Boys," says I solemn, "this here wise hombre, fake Pilgrim cattle buyer has jobbed the boss even worser'n he has jobbed us. Ye-ah, he now knows prezactly how much ol' Charlie will take for them yearlin's and you can bet your saddle blankets he won't give a dime more."

Heads nod and wag, every cowboy mighty concerned and worrit. Squinty opines, "If you ask me it was a dirt-mean trick this Alexander pulled on the boss. 'Course 'twould ha' been all hunky if he'd limit himself to jobbin' us rannies."

We agree that would simply have been a hoss on us and we wouldn't have had no hard feelin's. But trickin' the boss is a hoss of another color and we're plenty snorty; kinda honin' to take Mr. James Alexander apart and put him together again with his horns knocked down and his smeller flatter'n a pancake and his eyes all ringed round with puffy black rings.

Yet and not withstandin' how we

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feel, our guns is spiked on account of because cattle buyers is mighty nigh as scarce as mountain sheep on the plains and the old man is dead anxious to make a sale. Ye-ah, ol' Charlie is playin' up to Pilgrim James Alexander like he was the finest feller that ever wore dude duds on a roundup. He's even 'pologizin' for his cowboys ever havin' put the stranger to an inconvenience whatever and he says, "You'll be pleased of doin' it as I can see. Still, I rec'lect how Nevada had said to me he might be able to upset Pilgrim's apple-cart yet.

My side-kick is the dangest prankster what ever roped a calf and branded it all by his lonesome, yet you can bank on the cuss comin' through in a pinch like that time when he saved my neck. So I strain my eyes, gazin' off across the rollin' hills, right pretty with the colors of

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to know I fired that damned redheaded waddy who stole your clothes and hid 'em and who give you that tricky hoss to ride."

MR. ALEXANDER says that's bully. He hopes it taught Nevada Red a good lesson and he likewise hopes we've all learned something. "Now about your yearlings, Mr. Dinsmore, bunch the herd and I'll make you an offer." And he grins sardonic.

All the time we're whoopin' the cattle in the pasture together I'm wonderin' how the pink-toed golliwogs we can turn the tables on smart-alec Alexander. Ain't no way fall, and the sorta bleak sagebrush plains toward Ox Grove. Far away in the distance I'm mighty tickled to see a lone rider headed our way.

When at last we've got the yearlin's and short yearlin's and cut-back two's bunched, it so happens Pilgrim Alexander with ol' Charlie rein out to one side the bunch right near to where I'm holdin' herd. The boss says, "How you like them cattle?" and Alexander comes back, grinnin' smug:

"First we'll cut out every short yearlin' in the bunch and hold those short-age cattle in one herd. Next we'll chop out all the cut-back two's you've got left over from last year.

After that I'll cut the full-age yearlings ten per cent and for the bunch that's left I'll give twenty-five bucks a head."

Naturally the old man r'ars straight up and begins to sputter and cuss and talk about robbers, till all of a suddent his face falls. He has remembered how last night he talked plumb unguarded to this same cattle buyer, believin' the feller was a greenhorn who had no axe to grind. It takes all the steam plumb outa the boss. He shrugs and then mutters,

"Damn it all, man. No use for me to argue. You know the low figure I'll accept for these cattle."

"Wasn't it thirty dollars a head for all the full-age yearlings with a ten per cent cut?" inquires Alexander, his maddenin' smile right on the job.

I hip around in my saddle, which feels kinda hot maybe 'cause I'm so hot all over. Ain't it time that rider was gettin' here? There he comes. But it ain't Nevada Red. It ain't nobody I'd ever met afore. It's a neat-dressed, medium-sized feller, brown face, brown eyes, black hair, who sets his hoss like he b'longed a-top the nag.

"Charlie Dinsmore?" he inquires reinin' up.

"Yes," admits ol' Charlie, while Pilgrim Alexander begins to look less smug and begins to show he don't fancy this interruption none.

"I'm Allan Parks," opines the newcomer, and right then somethin' hits me spang-dab in the face. Allan Parks! An old pal o' Nevada's! The jasper Nevada was expectin' to come up this a-way.

"I'm a cattle buyer," the newcomer goes on, a twinkle in his brown eyes. "Representin' Swiggert, Holmes and Brown Commission House of South Omaha and Chicago. Glad to meet you, Dinsmore, for I heard in Ox Grove you had some yearling steers to sell. This the bunch?"

"This is the bunch," replies ol' Charlie instanter and I never saw a man look more relieved. But my goshikers, I've got a sudden hollow feelin' where my stomach orter be. The boss is takin' this Allan Parks at face value, for he does look like a real cattle buyer. Yet, figgerin' I'm hep to the whole scheme as cooked up by Nevada Red, I just know he can't be.

UH-HUH. Nevada has found his old pal in Ox Grove and has sent him out here to pose as a buyer so as to make Pilgrim Alexander squirm.

"Look the herd over, Mr. Parks," ol' Charlie invites. "By the way, this is Mr. James Alexander. He's also a buyer. But," speakin' quick, "don't let his being here stop you from making an offer on this herd. Alexander and I have reached no agreement as yet."

Parks says "howdy" to Pilgrim Alexander. Then he rides into the herd with ol' Charlie, neckin' his hoss alongside the new buyer's. This leaves Alexander to bite his finger nails. Soon some of the boys mosey around to me askin' what's up and I

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tell 'em private-like, so Pilgrim Alexander won't hear, what I figger is what.

They brighten up like a rusty pair of spurs rubbed with ashes and water. They slap their legs and whisper, "Good ol' Nevada Red! He's on the job and is Alexander's snout outa joint now!"

Presently the ol' man and Allan Parks finish prowlin' the herd and come back to where me and Alexander are waitin'. Furthermore, just as many of the boys as can leave their posts amble 'round to join us, all with their ears pinned back, all grinnin' cheerful oncet again. But I'm plenty misdubious, for Pilgrim Alexander has noticed those grins and he now wears a mighty sly expression. Plenty foxy that gazoob; nobody's fool.

Allan Parks says he likes the cattle and he'll make Charlie a flat offer of thirty bucks a head for 'em as they run. Which means there'll be no cut-back except of big jaws and cripples, which is understood. I just hold my breath wantin' to kick ol' Charlie to put him wise. But I can't reach him and there ain't no way I can tell him what's what without blurtin' it right out loud.

I'm hopin' and maybe prayin' too, and so are all the boys, that the boss'll say to Alexander, "You had the first chance to buy these cattle and now if you want to meet that offer I'm sort of obligated to talk business with you."

But ol' Charlie don't say that. What he actually says plumb floors me, floors the other boys likewise and I bet 'twould stun old Nevada Red if he was here, too. Nevada ain't here at the herd, but I have catched sight of him over at the chuck wagon nigh half a mile off.

Says the boss, "Parks, I'm damned glad you showed up. You see, not mincin' words, I'd a heap sight rather deal with a man like you than a sneakin' pup like this James Alexander. Alexander, that's my opinion of you. You're a sneakin', underhanded cur!"

Hub Drexel can't stand the strain no longer. Like me, he knows good and well this ain't the way Nevada Red had planned the stunt. Not a-tall! Ol' Charlie's goin' to lose a sale by wadin' into this sly, contemptible Alexander. Lose the sale plumb, because it's a cinch Allan Parks can't really buy nothin'. I'm sweatin' blood, and old Hub Drexel's lips is white, his rawhide face glistenin' with cold sweat as he yells:

"Steady, Charlie! You should give Alexander a chance to meet this newcomer's offer. 'Tain't ethical not—"

"Ethics be damned!" bellers the old man. "Was there anything ethical about this James Alexander posin' as a tenderfoot and gettin' wise to things he had no right to learn? No! He's jus' what I sed he was. Parks, your offer is accepted. How you like that, Mister Pilgrim Alexander?"

THE rest of us boys are plain speechless, lookin' like we'd been carved outa wood and feelin' about as wooden as we look. Once more Pilgrim Alexander grins his sardonic maddenin' grin.

"Why shouldn't I like it?" says he. "Now I'll just call Allan Parks' bluff. Pay for the herd, Mr. Parks. Pay for 'em with cash or with a check that won't bounce. A check that won't land you in the pen."

Sudden silence with Allan Parks settin' there on his hoss lookin' at Alexander like all the wind had been

taken outa his sails. Ye-ah, lookin' like a feller who's been caught bluffin' and has lost the pot. And ol' Charlie opens his mouth two—three times, his face a study as it comes to him that maybe this was all a big bluff. Pilgrim Alexander is the first to speak:

"Well, you see how it is, Mister Dinsmore. A damned bluff. Once again I've routed your cowpunchers at this game of playin' pranks. Over yonder at your chuck wagon, Charlie, I can see the cowboy called Nevada Red, and I smell a definite tie up between that redheaded prankster and this fake cattle buyer."

Ol' Charlie turns and glares toward the wagon. When he finds his voice he spits out, "Damn Nevada Red! I remember now his askin' about some fellow named Allan Parks. Had I seen this Parks in Ox Grove? Hellity-damn! I wish I'd never seen Allan Parks. I'll blister Nevada's hide with—"

I whirl my bronc 'round on his hind legs and fog lickety-split to the chuck wagon without lookin' back. It's high time Nevada was tipped off to make himself hard to catch. That blankety-blanked Pilgrim Alexander has put it over on us twice. The boss'll jus' have to apologize to him again and sell him the yearlin's at Alexander's price.

Nevada has seen me and is lopin' to meet me. As we pull up I yelp, "Scheme backfired. Went haywire! Fan the breeze afore the old man kills you."

"Hi-gosh, he won't!" and Nevada actually chuckles. "Cool off, Cotton Top, and come on to the herd."

Well, Nevada is leadin' and I got to foller him—to see him massacred, I suspect strong. But no. As we reach the herd and the men bunched around the cattle buyers what do I see but this brown-eyed Allan Parks writing out a check with a fountain pen, the check book restin' on the horn of his saddle. As he fills in that slip of paper he says to Pilgrim Alexander:

"Take a good look at that letter I just handed you, Alexander. See if it ain't from Swiggert, Holmes and Brown. See if it don't authorize me, Allan Parks, to buy cattle for 'em. Here's your money, Dinsmore."

Thereupon Pilgrim Alexander's face turns a sorta sickly green. He wilts and sags, all the steam and arrogance oozin' outa him. I hear myself askin' Nevada Red, "Is that check good? Is Allan Parks—?"

"A cattle buyer?" cuts in Nevada. "He sure is! I was holdin' it as a s'prise for ol' Charlie and was I glad to meet Allan las' night!" Nevada lifts his voice, "Hi there, Pilgrim! How they comin'? Shouldn't wonder but what I'll get my ol' job back again. But as for you, you'll kinda stop and study and then back up afore you start playin' any more tricks on cowpunchers and their boss. Am I right?"

Pilgrim James Alexander recovers sufficiently to glower at the redhead afore he slinks off toward the cavvy to get him his own hoss and take himself elsewhere, not actin' like he's feelin' very proud of himself neither.

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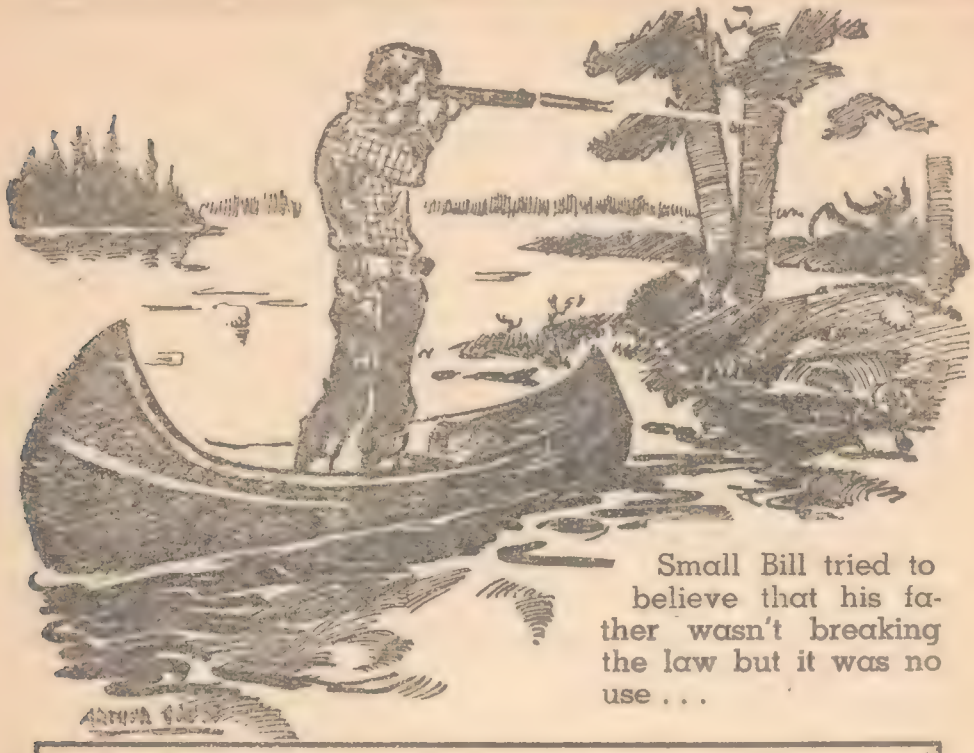

Small Bill tried to believe that his father wasn't breaking the law but it was no use . . .

BEAVER COWBOY

• By Eric Thane •

Killin' a beaver is worse than killin' a man, thought Small Bill. Then the lawmen came asking questions, and he had to decide if it was right to shield his father — even if Big Bill was killing beavers . . .

SMALL BILL was in the quicksand down by the beaver dam again. His father made the air blue for a minute, shouted, "Lie still! Don't wiggle an' you won't sink!" and ran for his lariat.

Presently he hauled Small Bill, grimy with wet sand, out upon the hard ground. In the water beyond the treacherous slime, Quintook, Small Bill's pet beaver, splashed his tail and dived, perhaps aware of Big Bill's wrath. Small Bill rubbed a wet hand over his mouth and eyed his father warily. This should be a licking

at the very least, he thought with a lump rising in his throat. His father had warned him too often of the quicksand.

"Lucky for you that you know how to handle yourself in that sand," Big Bill said, coiling his rope. "Just you remember, son, when you get in there you lie still an' holler for help. You won't sink unless you struggle."

The frown that drew his sun-bleached brows together slashed deep. Surprisingly, after his first outburst, he didn't say much more, merely warned his son against the sand again, and went slowly off. Small Bill's eyes widened. No licking! His mouth dropped open and he stared out to the pen, where Quintook had come to the surface.

"Great grizzlies!" Small Bill thought, blowing breath from his twelve-year-old lungs in surprise. "He didn't give me a licking!"

He sat down in the sun, his overalled figure curling under the cottonwoods. Presently Quintook shuffled along, gnawed experimentally at a tree, then sat up beside Small Bill. Bill poked a twig at him.

"Ain't that funny," he breathed. "He didn't lik me fer gettin' in the sand!"

It was earth-shattering. Not that he missed the licking; he was glad, for the pain in the seat of his pants, and the pain in his heart. Small Bill loved Big Bill, and swore to himself innumerable times that he'd never get into mischief again. But irritatingly, a devil seemed to drive him on and then he'd do things for which he was very, very sorry afterwards—like getting into the quicksand.

But—no licking! And now Big Bill was preparing to ride off across the prairie, as he done every day for the last two weeks. Small Bill screwed his tongue up into his mouth and mumbled a muffled comment to Quintook.

"He's been actin' funny every day, when he takes them rides. What d'you make of it, Quintook!"

Quintook examined a strip of willow and began to nibble. Small Bill said without impatience, "You're no help, beaver. I guess I gotta take things in my own hand. Somethin's botherin' Dad. I got to help him!"

He watched Big Bill ride up the valley and over the rim of the prairie, then he jumped to his feet. He stubbed his bare toe against a stump and howled but only briefly, for his feet were tough from innumerable stubbings. Quintook waded back into the pond, carefully skirting the quicksand and flapped a farewell like the crack of a rifle with his tail.

Small Bill knew he couldn't hope to keep up with his father, but he did his best. The thought that he was spying on Big Bill troubled him, but didn't deter him as he pounded along like an antelope, sidestepping a rattlesnake, leaping a prairie dog's den, avoiding with the dexterity of long experience the squat prickly pear clumps. He began to puff presently like an exhausted and cornered woodchuck, but he was tough, and plugged doggedly on.

THE jagged mass of the Sweetgrass hills loomed ahead. Small Bill squirmed through the red haze his exertions pumped into his brain, and he remembered that up in those hills was a beaver preserve, designated thus by the authorities out in the state capital. The penalty for trapping beaver was very large, Small Bill knew, but he also knew that there were desperate men who, greedy for money, would risk the

penalty to trap Quintook's brothers.

"Killin' a beaver is worse than killin' a man!" Small Bill had thought, and sincerely believed it, for he and Quintook were the closest of playmates and he had a very great respect for Quintook.

But he wasn't concerned about that too much now. His father's trail led across a gumbo gulch where the fine, alkali surface fixed the horse's hoofprints like snow. Beyond lay a stretch of level prairie and cottonwood-choked canyon. Small Bill got the feeling, then, that this canyon was where his father had gone, and as he crept on his heart surged with a dread he couldn't understand—until he peered down into the canyon and saw his father in consultation with several swarthy men whom Small Bill recognized as breed Indians from the reservation over west.

"Great grizzlies!" Small Bill breathed, wriggling forward on his stomach.

There was something furtive about it all that chilled the fever-heat of his wet face. The men moved around a number of crates and for a moment Small Bill couldn't see what was imprisoned behind the sapling bars, then with a fresh rush of apprehension he made out dark, furry creatures. Beavers! And something told Small Bill that they were from the preserve up in the hills, taken outside the law. By his father...

No doubt of that. Big Bill handed out a number of coins and the breeds smiled among themselves. They lifted the crates and carried them off down the canyon to cayuses tethered under the cottonwoods. Presently they rode away, swinging the crates behind them with difficulty.

Small Bill turned and fled. The alkali wind speared into his eyes and burnt away the tears. Big Bill—a criminal! It wasn't true, of course. Big Bill wasn't catching beavers from the preserve and selling them. What he'd seen there in the canyon was only a dream, Small Bill was sure. This wild race over the prairie, back home, was only a dream. He'd wake up pretty soon. Then he stepped on a thorn, and knew it was no dream.

Quintook greeted him with a splash that rang out like a rifle shot. Small Bill wandered up to the cabin and dropped on the step, head on his hands. Words pounded through his mind! He ain't a bad man, he ain't a bad man, I know he ain't—

Hoofbeats roused him. Three men rode down the grade that had been cut into the side of the coulee and Small Bill wiped his eyes and recognized them—a trio of "coffee coolers" as he called ranchmen who lived in town. Trigg, Kevin and Marias. Small Bill had heard that they "controlled" the country, though he didn't quite understand what that meant, except that it wasn't good to cross them. He'd always been a little scared, especially of Trigg, and as the squat, wide-faced man with pale pop eyes that reminded Small Bill of a frog's, leaned forward and called to him, he obeyed with great reluctance.

"Howdy, kid. Your paw around?"

SMALL BILL stared sullenly at the ground just in front of his toes, and nodded without enthusiasm.

"Where?" Kevin harshed.

"He—he'll be here right soon!" Small Bill stammered, jerking to the threat in his voice. He didn't understand, but he did look up, and right into Trigg's pale, pop eyes. The man winked at him, but to Small Bill it

wasn't friendly. He screwed his tongue into the corner of his mouth and though he didn't stare back at the ground, he did look carefully past Trigg's head to the sky.

"You're a nice kid. Bill Williams' son, ain't you? Mebby you can help us. We're interested in beaver. Ain't seen any around, have you?"

Small Bill jerked to suspicion. He squinted and returned, "There's only my pet, Quintook, down there at the beaver dam. He—he's the only beaver around!"

"Yuh wouldn't lie to us, would you, kid?"

They were the law and they were after Big Bill for stealing beaver from the preserve, of course. Small Bill felt his teeth grit. Trigg's pale eyes seemed to burn right into him. They even seemed to talk: "I'm the law—you tell me what your father is doing—you hear me?—tell!" That was what the trio meant. If he didn't tell they would take him away to that vague hell of which his father sometimes talked, which his mind had inflamed into a place terrible beyond human imagination. The "pen"—the state penitentiary. Small Bill felt his knees turn watery, but he thrust up his chin in defiance. Let them take him away! His father might be a criminal, but he'd never tell on him. Even if they dragged him off to the "pen"—

So he said, his small voice as hard as that of a man twenty years his senior, "I—I don't know nothin'. Honest I don't! I—I don't know what you're talkin' about!"

Marias said something that burnt Small Bill's ears, though he was used to Big Bill's strong language. Ice jabbed along his spine, just like the time the grizzly had leaped at him, stopped only by a bullet from Big Bill's Winchester. Fearfully, he watched Trigg draw a plug of natural twist from his pocket, shake the dust away, and bury his yellow teeth in it.

"Obstinate little devil, ain't you?" he said, and motioned to his henchmen.

"Come on, boys. Let's be ridin'!"

Small Bill breathed easily again. The men whipped up their horses, rode back whence they had appeared, and Small Bill dropped to the ground again. Hoofbeats roused him; it was his father this time. The elder Bill's face gleamed streaky white with alkali dust, and he smiled crookedly at his son.

"Howdy, son. You look like you lost your last friend."

Small Bill didn't trust himself to say a word. He felt a little embarrassed, and avoided his father's eyes, and wondered whether Big Bill noticed it. Apparently the big man didn't, for he rode away down to the barn. Small Bill managed to stay out of his sight until dinner was ready. His sickness at the thought of his father breaking the law couldn't stop his appetite, however, and he pitched into the beef slumgullion like a wolf.

"I see strange hawss tracks around," said his father casually. "Somebody been here, son?"

"Trigg—"

Of a sudden, Small Bill's appetite went. He slanted a look at his father, and became further troubled at the way the big man's face darkened. Slowly, he laid down his spoon, though the beef fumes arose most invitingly.

"TRIGG an' Kevin an' Marias!" Big Bill almost spat out. "An' they call themselves the law! Some-

body ought to take a gun to 'em—"

Then he halted, seemingly with an effort, and stared at his son. "Mebby I hadn't ought to speak that way," he said. "I've brought you up to respect the law, son, an' I don't want to harm that respect you've got for it. Jest forget what I said. The law is the thing. Obey it, an' never break it. Understand that, son? Never break it!"

Yet Big Bill was breaking it—

Small Bill couldn't understand. Maybe his father wasn't the great man he had always thought he was. Maybe he was just a common outlaw. He might even have escaped from the "pen"! But no, that couldn't be, Small Bill decided, swishing his spoon without enthusiasm through the slumgullion. Of course his father was the law-abiding man he'd always been, sure he was—

Presently he said, in a choked voice, "Dad, I—I figure the law is all right. But ain't there times when you got to break it—"

Big Bill seemed to become angry, then. He pounded his fist on the table and glared at his son. His voice roared so loudly that Small Bill cowered back, scared.

"The law's the law, an' there's never any excuse for breakin' it, son! You grow up respectin' the law an' you'll never get into trouble. There's never any excuse for breakin' the law!"

Yet Big Bill was breaking the law—

Small Bill left the table. There was something pounding inside him, something Big Bill had told him once was his heart. It had never hurt before, but it hurt now. Small Bill put his hand over his ear, as he did sometimes in bed to hear his heart, but now it wasn't any fun at all though it beat much more heavily than ever before.

He didn't sleep that night. There were too many fierce, hairy men chasing him with pitch forks, too many men with stars dragging his father off to the vague building he never could quite make out—the "pen." Once or twice he wakened himself with his whimpering. And then, having fallen into an uneasy sleep, he leaped upright in bed with a scream ringing in his ears.

"G-Great grizzlies!" he gasped.

The scream was his own. He sank back, sweating. What would his father say? He cowered, expecting Big Bill to come on a run, his big voice making the air blue with profanity.

But nobody came. Small Bill's curiosity stirred, for his father had never neglected him thus. He swung to the side of the bed, fiddled his toes and then, alarmed, crept back to the lean-to in which his father habitually slept.

"D-dad!" he whispered.

No answer. Moonlight struck through the window, and fell across the bed. Nobody there. Big Bill was gone! That was strange, for Big Bill wasn't given to cavorting around by night. He went to bed with the chickens, and constantly he impressed upon his son's mind that if you wanted to grow up big and strong, that was the time to sleep.

"I—I hope it ain't got anything to do with them beavers, Dad gone like this!" Small Bill whispered.

He peered through the window. He thought he saw a lantern glow down at the beaver dam, but he couldn't be sure. Fireflies, maybe. He climbed back into bed, shivering.

Towards dawn, other monsters chasing him into consciousness, he

sat up abruptly. A horrible thought sent sweat boiling out on his face. His father was stealing beaver from the preserve and wouldn't that mean that he would take beaver wherever he found them? He might even trap Quintook—

"But—but Dad wouldn't do that!" Small Bill whispered, the denial a lone hope in the dread that made even his mouth taste bad.

HE COULD hardly wait until dawn to prove that Quintook was still there. In the greyness he went down to the beaver dam, carefully skirting the treacherous, grass-covered sands, out to the pond and the stick-and-mud dome where Quintook lived. He half expected to glimpse the beaver among the aspens, chewing bark, but he was disappointed, and his dread grew and grew until his voice cracked when he called out "Quintook! Come here!"

He beat lustily against a tree, a signal to which Quintook always responded. But there was no response now. Just a vast silence broken by the furious thunder of Small Bill's heart. He beat again, but weakly this time. He knew Quintook would not respond. Because Quintook was gone.

"D-dad trapped him last night, an' sold him!" Small Bill breathed.

He wandered back to the house, not watching where he went because of the tears in his eyes. Once he misstepped and the apparently dry sod broke under him. Quicksand gushed up around his ankle, dragging at him furiously, but he jumped nimbly away.

"You—you darned ol' sand!" he cried. "Some—some day I'm goin' to lick you!"

He didn't pause to consider the absurdity of the statement, but plodded on up to the cabin. In a daze he built a fire, put coffee on to cook, whipped up batter for flapjacks. But of course there was no use in this. His father wouldn't be here to eat with him. His father had taken all the beaver in the preserve, had trapped his son's pet, and now no doubt he'd gone away.

But he hadn't. Presently Big Bill appeared, face thin and worn, and sat down to breakfast.

"Up early, ain't you, son?" he asked, not looking at Small Bill.

"Yup. I—I couldn't sleep!"

"Bad night last night!" said the elder Bill, slopping coffee because his hand was so unsteady, "Couldn't sleep a wink myself!"

Small Bill compressed his lips, in unconscious emulation of his father's actions when the elder was irritated. Of course his father hadn't slept—because he'd been down to the beaver dam, trapping Quintook! And now he lied to his son—

"What's the matter, kid?" Big Bill snapped.

"I—I ain't feelin' well—" Small Bill faltered.

Ordinarily Big Bill would have been vastly concerned. He wasn't, now. He just said, "Well, take care of yourself. I've got work to do!"

Small Bill watched him ride away, and he knew his father headed to the beaver rendezvous. Where he would sell Quintook! It wasn't fair, Small Bill thought, balling his fist. His father had no right.

"I—I hate you!" he cried, tears spilling down his cheeks. "I—I'll run away! I don't want nothin' more to do with you!"

But he didn't run away. At least, just then. He trailed over the prairie after his father, watched the busi-

ness going on down in the canyon. He had some half-formed notion of rescuing Quintook, but desperate as he was, he knew he'd stand no chance against his father and the dozen breeds who bargained over the beaver crates. So he returned to the cabin and sat there in dumb misery while the sun wallowed out of sight in fat even clouds.

"But I—I've got to run away!" he thought.

He was determined, finally. He threw his few belongings into a bandana and tied the corners. Tears dimmed the gloom that drew close in the cabin, and Small Bill was glad when, his task finished, he groped his way outside where the afterglow was still strong.

"I—I don't want to go! But I gotta—" he whispered.

"Headin' some place, kid?"

Small Bill hadn't seen the three horses tied down by the barn. Or the three men who came forward silently. Trigg and Kevin and Marias. Trigg's pale, pop eyes jumped around curiously, as if they had no relation to each other, and his big mouth chewed at a fast rate upon his quid.

"I—I—" Small Bill faltered.

"WALL, you better stay here awhile!" Trigg's jaws stilled and he opened a corner of his mouth to speak. "We got some talkin' to do with you, an' we'd hate to have you run away! Where's your old man?"

"He—he ain't here—"

"We know that," Marias said. "What we asked was, where is he?"

Small Bill dropped his bundle. Trigg's pale eyes popped at him, in a way that might have made him laugh if he hadn't known Trigg was the law and a powerful man.

"Better answer, kid!" Trigg advised, "We ain't foolin', like we was the other day!"

Small Bill felt his skin crawl under his worn short and overalls. He didn't understand, except that here was something terrifying. Something he couldn't fight but must run away from. He ducked like a spring and turned to flee, but Kevin's hand snapped out and hooked into the X of his overalls' back.

"You wait, kid!" he grunted.

"You—you leave me be—" Small Bill wailed.

"Now, listen here!" Trigg said. "We want information about yore dad, an' we're not in any mood to fool around. You savvy? We're the law in this country an' we're orderin' you to talk. Yore dad's been movin' all them beavers off the preserve up in the hills. He's movin' the last of 'em now, we got a hunch. Where is he? You know! We're sure you do!"

"Speak up, kid! Where's your old man!" Marias chimed in, and added, "We're the law. You got to tell us. You know about the law, don't you, an' you know you can't buck it?"

The law. That was it. He must speak, Small Bill thought; he must tell where his father was, because the law asked. Men who broke the law were very bad men. Like his father—

"I—I don't know—" he whimpered.

Trigg took his arm, and twisted. Small Bill fought against it, but a scream tore between his lips at the red pain.

"Speak up!" Trigg screeched, apparently in great anger.

Big Bill was outside the law. Further, he'd taken Quintook to sell. He was everything a man shouldn't be, and Small Bill was running away from him. The law should know

about him and take him to the "pen." Of course. Small Bill opened his mouth, but nothing came out, for he was remembering Big Bill, the whole, gruff two-hundred pounds of him which up until the last few weeks, had been so good to him.

But Big Bill was outside the law. Therefore Small Bill must talk, for the law wanted him to talk.

But he hesitated. And Trigg twisted his arm again, furiously. Small Bill heard his scream ring out. He quavered, "Oh, please, don't—I—I'll tell—"

"Now that's talkin'!" Marias grunted. "Where's your old man? Talk fast!"

"He—"

Pain still ran like flame down Small Bill's arm, but he knew now that law or no law, he wouldn't tell, ever. Big Bill might be outside the law, but he was still Small Bill's father.

But the pain still flamed in his arm, and when Trigg twisted again, he had to moan, "I—I'll tell!" He was so convincing, apparently, that He'd been good, once.

Trigg burst into laughter.

"Sure you'll tell!"

Into the depths of the Reich went Lt. Carl Schron, posing as an escaped Nazi officer, on a mission vital to the United Nations. And there he found himself face to face with Hauptmann Bronneau, cunning Gestapo agent who had tortured Carl Schron in a concentration camp before the war, and had lured Schron's brother to a frightful death!

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"HE—HE'S over there!" Small Bill whispered, pointing vaguely.

"Probably got a hide out," Kevin said. "You lead us there, kid!"

"S-sure—"

Trigg laughed again. "I gotta hand it to your old man!" he said. "He's clever! Here we were figurin' on goin' in to trap them beavers ourself an' make a heap of money. An' darned if your old man didn't get wind of it an' save them beavers!

But we'll catch up with him now!"

Small Bill didn't understand. These men talked as if they weren't the law—as if what Big Bill did were really lawful. He faltered, "How—how did you want to get the beavers when you're the law—?" and Trigg cut in, "Sure we're the law! In our way. We run the country, kid. Some day the real law out in the state capital is goin' to catch up with us, but by then we'll be headin' away with a pack of cash. We passed a rule givin' us the right to trap them beaver. Mebby the law in the capital wouldn't recognize that, but by the time it finds out, we'll be far away... That danged old man of yours beat us to it. He saved them beavers. He's sendin' 'em somewhere an' we aim to find out where."

Small Bill understood then, and pride swept all through him. This law was a fake law, the real law was the one his father obeyed and taught him to obey. His father wasn't the bad man he'd thought, but fair and square. Yes, sir, a real father to have.

One doubt lingered. Quintook. And then Kevin said, "Look, Marias, the kid here's got a pet beaver. That skin's worth twenty-five dollars. Let's pick it up while we're here—"

Small Bill understood. What his father had been afraid of was happening. But what his father hadn't figured on was that the pseudo-law might capture his son and force him to reveal his hide-out.

"The—the beaver's gone!" Small Bill whispered. "Big Bill took him!"

"Yore old man was sure intent on savin' all the beavers!" Kevin commented, "I reckon you're tellin' the truth. Now, you lead us to your old man. Get goin'!"

Trigg took a firm hold of the X on the back of Small Bill's suspenders. He picked up a club and Small Bill knew he wouldn't hesitate to use it.

But Small Bill knew what to do now. He wouldn't fail his father, either in thought as he'd done or in deed as he had almost done. So he walked on into the dusk—towards Quintook's pond—

"It—it ain't far!" he whispered. "Jest over the hill. But we got to walk. It's hid in rocks—"

"Get your guns ready, everybody!" Trigg snapped. "An' shoot that beaver-thief the minute you see him!"

Step by step, Small Bill lead them on. Down the path to the edge of the beaver pond. Across the quicksand—

One step. Two. Three. The grass underfoot began to heave in a way Small Bill understood. And then, suddenly, he twisted free of Trigg and leaped forward, hard. He landed on his back, the sand cradling him like rubber. And there he lay, without flinching a muscle, like a man riding salt water.

But the three men behind didn't know what small Bill knew. Someone screamed, "Quicksand!" and there was a rush toward firm ground. But the sand reached up hungrily, and as the trio struggled the harder, the quicker it drew them under.

But Small Bill didn't move. And after the sand had calmed over Trigg and Kevin and Marias he still lay there, his position anything but comfortable, but safe.

Big Bill would be home tonight. Small Bill would lie there, he decided, and then when he heard Big Bill's horse, he'd holler his head off for help. And Big Bill would snake him out, as usual.

"Great Grizzlies!" Small Bill said aloud, "An' won't I be glad to see Big Bill!"

TRAIL AND SADDLE

Fact Articles of The West

Angus McDonald --- Fur Trader

By Lee Thomas

THE year was 1847. Angus McDonald, his big frame garbed in the worn buckskin clothing of the trapper, stood on a spot six miles from the present town of St Ignatius, and studied the Montana terrain. To the east, across the blue waters of Flathead Lake, towered the gaunt scarp walls of the Mission range of the Rocky Mountains. To the north and south and west rolled the endless sweep of the sage-covered hills.

"Here's where we build the fort," Angus McDonald finally said.

The Indian who was with McDonald, a six-foot brave, said: "This spot is good, M'sier." He waved a bronzed arm toward the Mission mountains. "Up there, in that land, the streams are filled with many beaver. Mink run over those snows, and ermine and martin are there, too. And here on the plains are wolves and coyotes—there are many animals here, and there is much fur."

"We build here," Angus McDonald repeated.

Trappers, idle because fur is no good in the summer, were put to work, building the log trading post. Coppery Indians—all of the Selish tribe—also assisted. This was a Hudson Bay fort, part of the mighty far-flung Hudson Bay property, and was chartered by the English government.

Montana pine trees, straight and true, were put in position, and chinked together. Slowly the walls went into place, the buildings were completed. The long summer days became shorter; the sun lost its heat. Nights grew longer, the air held a wintry chill — and one night it snowed.

"Soon the fur will be prime," a trapper said.

Angus McDonald nodded. Soon his trappers would go out, their hearts light with the thought of the adventures ahead, and tend to their traplines. Angus McDonald glanced proudly at his trading post. Completed now, it stood staunch and ready, an able adversary willing to

struggle with the cruel northern winter.

Yes, Fort Connah was ready...

Angus McDonald was a Scotchman. Well educated, a student and thinker, he was a quiet, serious man. He did much to develop the northwest into the great land it is today. He was the last of the Hudson Bay company's great traders. The Indians trusted him and liked him. He treated them fairly, and made them his friends. But one time he ran into Indian trouble.

Unexpectedly, he came upon an Indian encampment, consisting of about six hundred Selish. They were singing San-ka-ha—the song the redman sings before he rides into battle. These Selish were riding out to fight their enemy, the cruel Blackfeet Indians. One of the redmen saw McDonald.

"You sing with us!" he ordered.

McDonald smiled and said, "I don't know your song."

"You soon learn," the Indian replied. He was a friend of McDonald's, but now hot blood coursed through his veins, and he lacked the ability to control his emotions.

"I help," another brave promised.

"Me, too," another declared.

THEY were tough-looking warriors. Their coarse black hair, stringy and greasy, hung to their shoulders, and they wore their crests of dyed eagle feathers, tinted by colored clay dug from the banks of the Clark's Fork river. Naked to the waist, their heavy chests were colored by rubbed-in clay. McDonald gave in.

"I'll ride with you," he said.

The northern night was starry, the air was clean. McDonald rode in the circle with the redskins, astraddle a black horse—his buffalo horse. He rode a full eagle feather bonnet. He tried to follow the Indian's war-song, but found it difficult.

The squaws sang, too. But their feminine voices could not stand the deep, harsh masculine notes of the San-ka-ha, so soon they were weeping and sobbing—thinking perhaps of their warriors and lovers and husbands and sons who were soon to ride out and battle the Blackfeet, somewhere under the peaks of the towering, snow-tipped Rockies.

That was in 1850. The trading period—the time of the trapper and trader—was rapidly drawing to a close. Fur was becoming scarce, and the country was being trapped-out.

One day an itinerant trader named Francois Finlay, known as Benetsee among the Indians, came up to Angus McDonald and asked McDonald to grubstake him. McDonald, probably thinking Finlay was going on a trapping expedition, agreed, and Finlay went into the mountains.

But Finlay was not going trapping, he was going out to hunt gold. The month before he had returned from California, and California had then been in the midst of a mad gold rush. And Finlay had done some thinking.

Finlay had a place on Benetsee creek, now known as Gold creek. While in California he had been unable to get a gold claim—the gold-bearing land had all been taken under possession—but he realized suddenly that the terrain of the mountains surrounding his home was very similar to that of the California gold country.

The gold fever burned in Finlay. But he did not tell Angus McDonald what he intended to do, for Angus McDonald would have refused to grubstake him had he known. For

the policy of the Hudson Bay company was to discourage gold-seekers. The company did that in order to avoid a gold rush and the influx of gold-seekers and settlers. For, if this happened, it meant the end of the fur business... And Finlay found gold!

He rushed into Angus McDonald's post, showed him the yellow metal. McDonald said, "An' how do you know this is gold?"

"I know gold," Finlay stated.

They sent the yellow metal to another Hudson Bay post, where it was pronounced to be gold. Finlay went back to his claim, panned for two more weeks, but only got a few ounces of the yellow metal. He returned, disgusted, to Fort Connah.

"I can make more money trading with the Indians," he said.

But the days of Fort Connah were numbered. Ten years later, in 1862, gold was discovered in Grasshopper Gulch, and the boom was on. Trappers became prospectors, and the fur business was through. The Hudson Bay company was out of business.

Angus McDonald went West. There was still some fur-trading in Oregon and Idaho and Washington, but this, too, soon played out, so he returned to Montana, where he died in 1889.

Today, in western Montana, there in the Mission range, is a mighty peak that rises upward into the blue northern sky — a peak eternally clothed by ice and snow, a mountain that stands above its surrounding peaks... This peak was named after a man whose name shall live forever in Montana history. A man who helped build the West into the great land it is today.

That peak is named Mount McDonald.

STOP THIS USELESS KILLING!

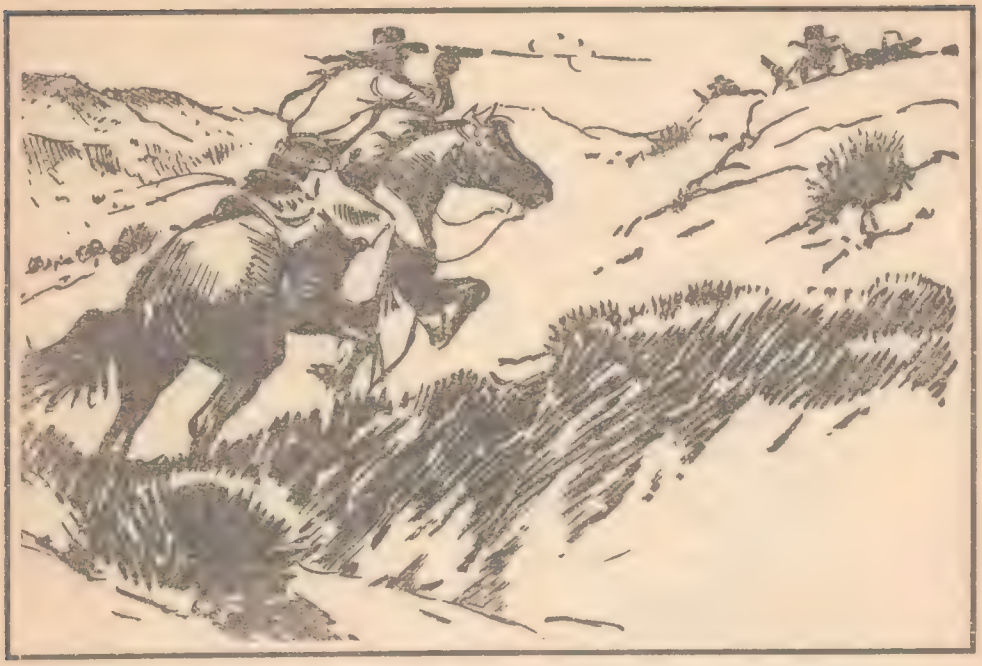
The citizens of Constable, scoundrel and honest rancher alike, were too astonished to talk back when mild-looking, bespectacled Hannibal Colts, the town medico, issued that order.

And however much the honest ranchers agreed with Doc Colts' aims, they had to do something about this new range feud which had suddenly sprung up.

He was a healer, bound in sacred vows to his art, but he rebelled at endlessly patching up bullet-torn men, only to have to repeat the job as soon as they were able again to walk. Could one man enforce a new law and order in Constable? Was the medico a fool, out only to find his own lonely Boothill?

Don't miss Doc Colts Operates by T. W. Ford in the January issue of COMPLETE COWBOY

LONGRIDER LAW



By Lee Floren

THEY cut the dead man loose from his saddle and carried him into the sheriff's office and laid him on the dirty floor. Big Matt Rayder, the Dawson county sheriff, stood and looked down at the body for some time, and nobody spoke. And when Matt Rayder did speak, there was a catch in his voice.

"Who killed him?" he asked.

A cowman said, "We don't know, Matt."

"Ambush?" Matt Rayder asked.

"Ambush," the cowman repeated. "We foun' him on the Cold Spring trail, near Signal Butte. The hombre that kilt him had hid behind a big boulder, we saw his tracks. We trailed him a ways but lost his tracks in the lava beds. Maybe we could a done a better job of trackin', but we figgered we oughta get Harr into town to you right pronto, seein' you two was such good friends."

> "Matt Ryder: I kilt Murray. I been watchin' you when you been ridin' out here from Dawson City. I aim to kill you too, Matt; I'll be waitin' for you in Dark Canyon. Come with your guns on. Trigg Fanning."

Rayder stood and looked down and said, "They never made a better man than Harr Murray."

"What you goin' to do?" a cowman asked.

"Ride out to the lava beds an' look for tracks."

"We'll make up a posse an' ride with you, Matt. Us boys thought a heap of Harr, an' we'd like to help."

"Thanks, boys. But if'n you don't mind, I'll handle this alone. You understan', don't you?"

They looked at each other and nodded. They understood. Silently, they trooped out, mounted their broncs and rode out of Dawson City.

His face grim, Sheriff Matt Rayder knelt beside the dead man, and rolled him over on his back. Kneeling there, he fought back the hardness in his throat. He was big and tough and strong but this was one of the hardest blows he had taken in his thirty years. He and this man Harr Murray had ridden together through heat and sleet, had shared blankets. And now Harr Murray lay dead....

Matt unbuckled the deputy badge from Harr's vest, and got to his feet. He walked to his desk, opened a drawer, and put the badge in it. Then, from another drawer, he took out a reward placard that had arrived the morning before on the Helena stage. He stood looking at the man pictured on the placard.

This man had a cruel, narrow face. His lips were thin, his eyes were set closely together. Matt Rayder looked at that face for some time, then he read the printing underneath the picture.

Wanted:

Trigg Fanning! Fanning killed Sheriff Ike Watson, Casper, Wyoming, in a recent jail-break. He is believed to be heading for Montana. Five thousand dollars is offered for his capture, dead or alive.

Wyoming Protective League,
Casper, Wyoming.

SUDDENLY, Matt heard footsteps on the outside porch. He slipped the placard hurriedly into the drawer, but he was too slow—the woman who entered saw the reward-notice.

She said, "Let me see that, Matt."

"It's nothin'," he said.

She crossed the room, opened the drawer, and took it out. She looked at it, her eyes showing bitterness, her lips a hard line in her fine face.

"Fanning killed Harr Murray," she said.

"You're jus' talkin', Marie," Matt Rayder said.

"I'm not," she said. "Martin was tellin' me about findin' Harr, dead with a bullet in his back. Fanning killed him. He'll kill you next, Matt."

"Don't talk like that, Marie!"

"I'm the cause of it all," she said. "Fanning hates you because I married you instead of him, down in Arizona."

"Hush," he said.

"But it's true, Matt!"

"No!" he said.

His voice was stern. She quietened and said, "But if he didn't kill Harr—and he hated Harr, too—then who did kill him?"

"I don't know."

"Where is Spurr Jordan?" she asked suddenly. "He threatened to kill you, Matt, back in Arizona, when he rode with your outlaw gang. And where is Spurr Jordan's pal, Clem Mitter?"

"They're in Yuma pen."

"Maybe they broke out. Maybe they—" She spread her hands to show bewilderment. "I don't know, Matt. I only wish I knew—"

He said quietly, "Be strong, honey."

She left and Matt Rayder went to the gun-rack. There he took a Winchester 30-30 and broke it to verify its loads. This done, he went down the street and entered the hardware shop. An old man, gray-haired and stooped, stood behind the counter.

"I left my office unlocked, Jim," Matt said. "Lock it after you take Harr out. Give him a good coffin."

"I sure will, Matt."

"Thanks," Matt said, and left.

He went to the livery-barn, saddled his iron-grey gelding, and rode out of Dawson City. His thoughts were many. For eight years, he had been sheriff here—eight years, he had upheld and enforced the law. But the years before that....

Now, these years passed before him in grim review. Wild, reckless blood coursing his veins. Mad smoking guns. Outlawry and the whine of lead. Wet cattle swimming a river. Money—easy money.

Then he met Marie.

Fanning had said, "She's my woman, Matt."

Matt laughed and said, "You lie, Fanning."

Fanning's face hardened. "No man's callin' me a liar, Matt."

"I am," Matt said.

Fanning's gun came from leather, but already Matt's .45 had roared. Fanning dropped his gun and grabbed his broken shoulder. He leaned against the fork of his saddle and cursed.

"I'll kill you for this, Matt," he said.

"Don't be a fool, Fanning," Matt said.

Harr Murray spoke then. "You go gunnin' for Mat, Fanning," he said, "an' you better have some lead handy for me. I'm sidin' Matt to the last trigger pull."

Fanning said, "Okay, Murray."

HE rode out of the outlaw camp, then, straight and uncompromising in his saddle, and Spurr Jordan and Clem Mitter, the other two gang members, watched him leave. And Spurr Jordan's eyes were deep with many thoughts.

"What you thinkin' about, Jordan?" Matt Rayder demanded.

"What's it to you?"

"I'm makin' it my business," Matt said. "An' if you don't like it, take your side-kick Mitter an' head outa here. You're through here, Jordan."

"I don't think so," Jordan said easily.

"Climb off'n your bronc then," Matt invited. "Harr, keep your gun on Mitter—see that he don't try no funny business while I beat hell out of Jordan!"

Harr Murray grinned. "With pleasure, Matt." His .45 covered Mitter. "Sit your bronc, fella!" His grin widened. "If'n you can't whip that dandified dude, Matt, I sure as heck can!"

"Don't worry," Matt said.

Jordan dropped out of saddle, and came in on Matt. They fought then—fought silently, terribly. And, when it was over, Jordan's handsome face was a beaten, bloody thing. His good looks—the looks women loved—was destroyed and made ugly by Matt Rayder's big fists.

Jordan, the spoiler of women.

Now Matt had reached the lava beds. He circled, found no tracks, then struck boldly across the gray, flinty expanse of lava. An hour later, in a strip of sand, he saw what he searched for—horse tracks, leading toward the mountains that lay five miles away. He headed that way.

Nothing missed his eyes. Once, he saw something white in the brush ahead, and he hurriedly pulled his bronc into some bullberry bushes.

For some time he sat there, his lathered bronc breathing heavily. Soon, he saw a deer come out of the brush —he knew then he had frightened the animal and the white he had seen had been the white flag made by the animal's upright tail.

He rode on, following a dim, rocky trail. All this time, he had a hunch he was being watched—somewhere, hidden eyes probed him. It would be easy for a man to lay up in the rocks and watch him through a pair of field glasses...

An hour later, deep in the mountains, he saw a piece of paper hanging on a rose bush. Leaning from saddle, he picked it from the bush. The writing was scrawled and laborious.

> Matt Rayder
>
> I kilt Murray. I been watchin' you when you been ridin' out here from Dawson City. So I sneak ahead of you, an' planted this note where you was bound to see it.
>
> I aim to kill you too, Matt. I'll be waitin' for you in Dark Canyon. Come with your guns on. Trigg never forgets or forgives!
>
> Trigg Fanning.

Matt Rayder smiled grimly, "Okay, Fanning," he muttered.

Matt rode on, lifting his jaded bronc with his spurs. Now he was deep in the mountains and the afternoon shadows were growing long. The way he figured, it was still three miles to Dark Canyon, but he took his time and was careful to avoid riding into any possible ambush.

Ever suspicious, Matt did not ride openly into Dark Canyon's mouth. He rode up on the rimrock and there, hidden by the huge sandstones, he tied his bronc to a. boxelder tree. Then, hidden by the brush that lined the canyon's walls, he slowly worked his way downward, careful to dislodge no rocks that would roll downward and let anybody below know where he was.

NOW he was at the canyon's bottom, a dry creek bed dotted with boulders. Cautiously, he went forward to where the canyon widened out in a small park. Suddenly he halted, staring at the man who sat fifty feet away, his back against a rock. This man had a rifle lying across his knees, and he was watching the canyon's mouth.

Heart beating unsteadily, Matt studied the man. The evening shadows were thick, but still he could make out the man's features. And that man was Trigg Fanning! Matt stared. No, Fanning still looked the same—a trifle older, perhaps—but that was the only difference.

For one long second, Matt Rayder stood there. And, in that clock-tick, he thought of many things. He thought of the outlaw trail, of roaring guns. He thought, too, that a man's past is never dead. That, when a man has erred, he has to live the rest of the life with that error. Now, the red mad days—the days of hell-roaring outlawry—were tormenting him again.

He moved unseen toward Fanning. Every muscle tense, his hands on his holstered guns, he moved silently forward and, when fifteen feet separated them he said, "Well, here I am, Trigg Fanning!"

His words ran across the still evening air. They seemed to shatter the stillness. But, strangely, Fanning didn't jump to his feet. Without moving his body, he turned his head and looked at Matt Rayder. He just

sat there looking at Matt for a long moment, and then he spoke.

He said, "Matt, ride on!"

"I found your note," Matt Rayder said.

"I never wrote that note, Matt."

Matt frowned. What was this? "Don't try to talk yourself outa this, Fanning. You was sittin' there waitin' for me to ride into your trap. But I beat you at your own game—I sneaked down behin' you. Now get to your feet and make that rifle talk!"

"I can't, Matt."

"Why not?"

Fanning said, "I'm tied down, Matt."

Matt Rayder doubted his ears. Suddenly, he saw then that Fanning spoke the truth. Ropes bound Fanning tightly to the rock—why, the man couldn't move anything but his head. Matt's breath caught.

Matt said, "What's behin' all this, Fanning?"

"I—" Fanning began.

Fanning didn't finish, for the brush beside Matt opened suddenly, and a man stepped out. He was a tall man who wore batwing chaps and fancy inlaid spurs, and who toted two guns. Once, he had been good-looking, but now his face was a scarred, ugly thing. And Matt Rayder stared in amazement.

"Spurr Jordan," he said huskily.

"That's me, Matt."

Matt asked, "What you doin' here, Jordan?"

"Me an' Mitter broke outa Yuma pen, Matt. You sent us behin' them bars, an' we're payin' you plenty, Rayder!"

"What'd you mean—I put you behin' bars? How do you get that way?"

Jordan said angrily, "We rode smack dab into Sheriff Hans Nelson's posse, Rayder. You an' Nelson was friends, even if'n you was an outlaw an' him a sheriff! Me, I always figgered you put Nelson on our trail after we busted outa your gang!"

"You lie, Jordan."

"Don't call me a liar," Jordan growled. He stroked his broken, scarred face. "You gave me this mug I got, Rayder. For years I've been in a rotten, stinkin' cell, thinkin' of that fist whippin' you gave me."

"How'd you get out?"

"Busted out," Jordan boasted. "By luck, we read about Fannin' breakin' outa jail, too, so we looked him up, figuring he'd lead us to you. Well, he did. An' me an' Mitter's cleanin' the slate tonight when we kill you two."

"DID you kill Harr Murray?" Matt Rayder asked.

"We sure did," Jordan said. "We left that note, too, an' signed Fannin's name to it. Heck, you walked plumb into our trap!"

"Reckon so," Matt admitted.

Matt was smiling, but under his smile he was tense. He was on the spot, sure enough. He looked at Trigg Fanning. Their eyes met, and Matt said: "Sorry I ddin't trust you, Trigg."

Fanning said nothing. They stood there—three men who had ridden the dim trail of outlawry stirrup to stirrup, had stood back to back and fought off the law with blazing six-guns. Now, their guns would speak again—only this time they would cough lead at each other, instead of some common foe!

Matt's brain was racing. Fanning had a rifle and that rifle was in Fanning's hands. But Fanning broke that hope when he said, "This rifle ain't loaded, Matt."

"I see," Matt said.

But Jordan's .45's were still in

holsters! And Matt knew he could outdraw and outshoot Jordan. A sudden hope speared through his breast. Then that hope sank. Where was Mitter? Was he still in the brush behind Matt?

But there was no other way out. He would have to draw, shoot down Jordan, then turn his guns on Mitter, who would undoubtedly shoot from the brush at him. And, if Mitter got him first, it would have to be that way!

Matt dropped to one knee. And, as he dropped, he drew his .45's. Caught off-guard, Jordan started his draw. Hope surged through Matt as he saw he had Jordan bested. Now Matt's guns streaked from holsters, and Jordan was just getting into his draw. Matt's guns leveled, he eared back the hammers—

But Matt never shot. For a bullet, coming from the brush, ripped across his skull, sending him slumping forward. Dimly, as he passed out, he knew Mitter had shot him from ambush and, dimly, he wondered if he were going to die...

But he wasn't dead. When he came to, he found himself lying on the ground. He opened his eyes. Everything was inky dark. He got to his hands and knees and crept forward until he ran into a wall. Only then did he realize he was in a small building. He was a prisoner.

Automatically, he reached for his guns, but his holsters were empty. He sat down, and fingered the wound on his skull. It was a nasty groove that had tore its way through flesh and blood and bone. But it had stopped bleeding.

Groping his way, he felt the room's walls, came to a door. He leaned against it and pushed until the exertion made his aching head spin, but the door was bolted on the outside.

The building had no windows. Suddenly he almost fell over something. His fingers, exploring in the dark, felt of the metal object. It was a round-bellied heater-stove. He got to his knees, and felt of the stove's legs. One was loose and he took it and groped his way to the wall.

The building was made of pine logs. The inside still had its bark and the walls were rough. The space between the logs was chinked with mud. Using the stove leg, he pried some of the chinking loose. It fell to the sod floor.

Bright moonlight suddenly streamed through into the room. One eye to the crack, Matt surveyed his surroundings. He knew instantly where he was.

He was deep in the mountains. Yonder, he saw two other cabins and behind them was a small log barn. This was the Circle S line-camp.

THE line-camp was used only in the winter. Evidently Jordan and Mitter had stumbled across the buildings, and decided to use them as a hideout. Cowboys and cowmen never rode this country in the summer.

He studied one building. Inside, a lamp was lit. He could see the light peeping out from under a drawn blind. He realized that this was the cabin housing Mitter and Jordan.

The other cabin was dark. It stood heavy and sombre against the moon. Where was Trigg Fanning? Was he in that building?

Matt didn't know. A wave of nausea swept over him, and he leaned against the wall and fought the blackness. Finally it passed and, sick and wounded, he found himself shaking. Gradually the tremors left him.

He would have to get out! That

thought hammered at his brain, beat into his thoughts. He would have to get out and face Jordan with roaring guns. And face Mitter, too. He would have to kill them.

For, if he didn't, then Marie—That thought hurt. They would reveal that he, Sheriff Matt Rayder, was a former outlaw. That, even now, there was reward money offered for Matt Rayder's arrest, down in Arizona. And if he went to prison and left Marie—Matt Rayder didn't like to think of that.

Suddenly, he heard a door open, heard it slam shut. Eyes to the crack, he watched two men leave the one house. Jordan, tall and angular, walked slightly ahead of Mitter, a shambling, ape-like hombre.

They went to the other cabin, and Jordan kicked the door open. They entered. Matt couldn't see them now, but he could hear their conversation.

"How'd you feel, Fannin?" asked Jordan.

Fanning said, "Give me a gun, Spurr, an' I'll kill you two murderers!"

Matt heard an open-handed blow, heard a body crash to the ground. Jordan and Mitter came out, locking the door behind them. Then, they went toward Matt's cabin. Matt watched them coming, and he frowned.

Something was haywire here... Why was Jordan and Mitter holding him and Fanning prisoners? Why hadn't Jordan killed them back in Dark Canyon?

Matt's questions were soon answered. Jordan hooked his thumbs in his belts and asked, "How's the head, Matt?"

"All right," Matt said. "What'd you aim to do, Jordan?"

Mitter spat dryly, a smile on his lips, and Jordan grinned. "When is the Silver Crick stage haulin' in the bullion from Lone Deer mine?" Jordan wanted to know.

"So that's your play," said Matt. "You know that me, bein' the law, knows when the bullion's goin' to be shipped into Dawson City. An' you figure I'll tell you so you gents can stick the stage up an' make a killin' in dust."

"You think fast," snarled Mitter.

"What's in it for me?" Matt asked.

"We'll turn you loose...after the holdup," said Jordan.

Matt had to laugh. "You're a damned liar," he said.

Jordan stepped forward and struck. The blow, unexpected, crashed into Matt's face, driving him backwards against the wall. There, by superhuman effort, Matt held himself on his feet, his face pale. He bunched his muscles and started forward. Jordan drew both guns, centered them on him.

"Move another step," growled Jordan, "an I'll plug you, Rayder!"

Matt stopped. He never had a chance. Blood trickling from his nose, hate burning inside him, he waited for Jordan's next words.

"Sure you won't talk, Rayder?"

"That's right, Jordan."

MITTER said, "We got a way of makin' a hombre talk, Matt."

"Mebbeso," Matt agreed dryly.

They left, and Matt stood there, thinking fast. He knew what Mitter meant—a hot iron applied to the soles of his feet. He heard Mitter bolt the door. It sounded as though he slid a peg through a wooden lock outside.

He got the stove leg, slid it through the crack between the door and casing, but got no results—the heavy leg was too wide to pry loose the lock. Frowning, he leaned against the

door, panting from his labors.

He needed something to use for a pry—something thin and strong. He went to the stove, opened up the lids, ran his hand down into the fine wood ashes, and felt of the grate. But he couldn't use that; it was too cumbersome.

A sudden thought hit him. Hurriedly, he dropped to his knees, searched with exploring fingers under the stove, but found nothing. He jerked open the ash-pan door, ran his fingers inside. He felt something in the ashes, and his heart leaped.

He drew the steel implement out. It was the stove poker. His heart leaping, he fingered the instrument. It was a long, thin piece of spring steel. He knew that it was a leaf from a buggy spring.

Moving swiftly, he went to the door, inserted the spring between door and casing, threw his weight against it. Muscles straining, he labored. Wood cracked, steel groaned. Still the door held.

He stopped, caught his breath. Then, suddenly he threw his entire weight against the spring. The spring bent, and more wood crackled. Desperately, Matt lunged. Steel snapped and the door suddenly flew open.

Matt slipped outside, closed the door behind him. Coming from the dark cabin, the bright moonlight momentarily blinded him. But this passed, and he looked toward Fanning's cabin.

He stared, doubting his eyes. For the door of that cabin was open! Fanning, too, had managed to escape! But where was Fanning now?

Matt dismissed that thought. Maybe Fanning had made good his escape, maybe even now he was heading out of this mess by riding into Canada.

Matt's brow furrowed. He needed a gun—any kind of a gun. But where would he get it? Then, a thought came to him.

Somewhere, Jordan must have some horses and, close to the horses, would be the saddles. And each of them packed a saddle rifle. Matt saw some brush ahead; he pushed into it. Ahead, too, a horse nickered softly.

He came to the corral, a small cottonwood enclosure. Four broncs were inside — his iron-grey and three others. That meant a horse for Jordan and Fanning and Mitter. And that meant, too, that Fanning had not left!

Matt worked swiftly. He went to his own saddle, perched there on the corral's top bar. Sure enough, his Winchester was still in its boot. He drew the rifle and broke it and the moonlight glistened on the shiny cartridges inside.

"Okay," Matt grunted.

Rifle in hand, he stood in the brush, building his plan of procedure, his eyes riveted on the cabin housing Jordan and Mitter. There, the lamp was still lit. Somehow, he'd have to get Jordan and Mitter into the open. Get them outside and fight it out with them over blazing guns.

Matt started forward, then halted suddenly, his blood freezing. He heard footsteps behind him, and he whirled. But he was too late, for already a rifle-barrel was jabbed in his back. And a voice, soft and purring, sounded in his ears.

"You ain't goin' no place, Rayder!"

Matt's eyes opened wide, he turned. Fanning stood there, his rifle up. "What's up?" Matt asked.

"You're not killin' them two skunks, Matt. I am."

"Let me help," Matt said.

Fanning shook his head. Wounded, his clothes bloody, he stood there,

his handsome face showing determination.

"I got you into this mess," Fanning said. "They used me for a decoy to lure you out here. They kilt Harr Murray, an' blamed it onto me. Then, too, you got Marie an' the kids."

"WHAT'd you aim to do with me?" asked Matt.

"Tie you up."

"What if you get killed? Then, they'll have me, plumb tied up!"

Fanning frowned. "Give me your word, Rayder?" he asked. "Tell me that you won't try to kill 'em unless I'm dead?"

Matt pondered that. He studied Fanning, reading the man's strength. Fanning was almost out on his feet. Only his nerve and fight were carrying him forward.

"Okay," Matt said.

Fanning said, "All right, Matt, your word's good." His rifle lowered, and Matt struck. He had no other way out. His fist whammed into Fanning's jaw, and Fanning went down. He never knew what hit him. He lay on his back, knocked senseless, his rifle beside him.

Matt stood looking at him. Inside, he felt sort of sick. He'd thought a lot of Fanning, back in those outlaw days. Now, Fanning lay there, his dark hair almost all gray, his face grooved and wrinkled by hard living.

Matt turned, started for Jordan's cabin. Then, suddenly, he halted, his breathing quickening. The moment before, there had been a light in that cabin. And now, the cabin was dark!

Silently, Matt drew back into the brush. Evidently Jordan and Mitter had heard the commotion he and Fanning had raised. Sensing something wrong, even now they might be moving in on him!

"Put up your hands, Rayder!" a voice behind him snapped.

Matt froze in his tracks. That voice belonged to Spurr Jordan. Busy thoughts catapulted through Matt's brain; he found but one answer. Hurriedly, he dropped to his knees, pivoted on his hips, and faced Jordan.

Jordan was caught off-guard. Despite his surprise, he got in first shot —and missed. Now Matt let his hammer drop. The bullet hit Jordan in the ribs, and turned him. Jordan's next bullet plowed into the ground beside Matt.

From the corner of his eye, Matt saw Mitter step hurriedly from the brush, his pistols raised. Rolling over, Matt flung a shot at Mitter—a lucky shot. For Matt's lead whammed Mitter between the eyes, killing him in his boots.

Mitter stood stock-still, his guns dropping. He coughed, and his knees buckled. Then his knees sagged completely and his apish body hit the ground, face down.

Swiftly, Matt turned, faced Spurr Jordan. But already, his strength gathered, had Matt covered. Jordan's .45's bore down on Matt. Jordan's thumbs, gnarled and strong, had the hammers eared back.

"Move, an' I'll kill you, Rayder!"

Jordan had him. That word beat on Matt's brain, drummed in his thoughts. There was no way out of this. He could only stall for time, and hope. He made his voice level.

"What's next, Jordan?"

"Only one thing, Rayder. Death!"

"You're a dirty dog," Matt said.

Jordan laughed. Then his laugh died suddenly. For the brush crackled behind him, and he turned. Jordan stared. Matt Rayder stared, too.

For a man stood in the brush. A beaten, hulk of a man. Blood covered his shirt, his face was bloody. But his eyes, half-hidden under heavy brows, were hard and bright in the flickering moonlight. He held a rifle, pointed at Jordan.

"Fanning!" Jordan breathed.

"Come a-shootin'," Fanning snarled.

Jordan's guns roared, and Fanning's rifle coughed flame. Jordan's lead picked up Fanning, turned him, and dumped him to the ground. But Fanning's rifle took its toll, the bullet hitting Jordan's belly.

NOW Matt Rayder took a hand in the death game. Rolling over, firing from the ground, his rifle spoke. Jordan stiffened, seemingly slapped hard by some unseen hand.

Jordan stood stock-still, his guns sagging. And Matt Rayder waited, on one knee—waited to see if Jordan would shoot again.

Jordan tried to raise his guns and fire. But death, struggling with life inside him, won at last. And Jordan, sighing heavily, toppled forward, crashing lifelessly on the ground at Matt's feet.

The gun-roar died down, the powdersmoke rose. Matt crawled to Fanning, shook him. Fanning's eyes opened.

"They dead?" he asked.

Matt said, "Yes, Fanning."

Fanning said slowly, "That's good." He coughed and spat blood. "I'm dying, Matt."

"You'll pull through, Fanning."

Fanning tried to laugh, ended up coughing. That passed and he said, "Don't string me, fella." He added, "Say god-bye to Marie, Matt?"

"I sure will, Fanning."

Fanning smiled then. "She's a good woman," he said. His head went back, and his eyes were blank, and he died in Matt Rayder's arms.

Rayder climbed to his feet, stood looking down at the dead men. They were all dead now—Fanning and Jordan and Mitter and even Harr Murray. That meant that no living man knew that he, Matt Rayder, an ex-outlaw, was hiding under a law-badge in Montana.

Matt Rayder looked at his badge. The metal star, gleaming brightly in the moonlight. And Matt felt a sudden sweep of pride. He'd wear that star, and wear it to protect his voters. And, in that way, he'd atone to society for those hellish mad outlaw years.

Bright star...

The Vigilantes Ride Tonight!

This is war, stranger, and we're in for the duration. Either we clean out the owlhoots and desperados in this territory, or they'll clean us out. There's someone in this town who's directing them — we'll find that someone and we'll find

"THE GUN-GHOST OF HILL CITY"

By LeRoy C. Davis

WATCH FOR THIS NEW NOVEL IN THE JANUARY ISSUE

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

FUGITIVE FROM HELL

★ **By Charles N. Heckelman** ★

It looked as if blind fate had cheated Russ Richmond of his revenge—until a new treachery put him on a fresh vengeance-trail . . .

A FRIGID wind boomed down from the sawtoothed crags and battlements of the Sierra Luna mountains. On the wings of that gale rode a mealy white curtain of driving snow.

Trails were blotted out. Canyons and gullies and deep ravines were piled high with drifts.

It was a bleak, forbidding land, matching the bleakness that covered Russ Richmond's taciturn features. He was a tall, rawboned man in the early thirties. His features were in-

ordinately pale, the cheekbones high, the skin below them sloping inward to give him a gaunt, tough appearance.

To Russ Richmond this rugged country was home. Yet, as he pushed his laboring mount along the snow-filled trail, there was no joy in his heart—only a compelling bitterness that was like acid gnawing at his insides.

To a man who had spent the last five years of his life behind iron bars and granite walls for a crime he had not committed, and now rode with but one purpose—the desire for swift revenge—this land held no warmth, no laughter, no bright hope for the future.

A sudden lull in the storm thinned out the thick curtain of snow, showed him the yellow glitter of lamplight, the dark blur of a house bulking against the surrounding white background, and told him that he'd reached the end of his long trek.

In that house he'd find Sam Swope —the man he'd traveled one hundred and fifty miles to kill. Five years of ceaseless torment would bring their ghostly reward. He'd have his revenge in gunsmoke against the man who had damned him to a living hell in Devil's Acre—the worst prison in the West.

Devil's Acre had laid its mark upon Russ Richmond. It had toughened him, made him a thoroughly dangerous man, put murder lust in his heart.

Somewhere along his back trail the law was still looking for him—an escaped convict. But Russ Richmond did not care about that. He was a fugitive from hell with a job to do and no power on earth would stop him from doing it.

Straight toward the cabin Richmond headed his jaded piebald, circling around to the rear. Dismounting stiffly and hidden by a sea of white, he led the tired animal into the warm shelter of the barn, noting that there was only one horse there.

Not interested in ranching, Sam Swope had no need of hired hands. It was well, for there would be no one to interfere with Russ Richmond's plans in this isolated region.

Ploughing through the knee-deep snow, Richmond reached the back door and thrust it open. He found himself in a dark corridor with light bannering from the front room at its end. Now his lips began to settle in a somber wedge across his face, and he opened his blanket coat to remove his Colt from its well-oiled holster.

Several strides carried him into the front room—and into a scene that shocked him into bewildered immobility.

There was a bed in the room against the far wall and lying between blood-stained sheets was Sam Swope.

"Russ Richmond!" gasped Swope weakly, blood flecking his lips.

For a moment Richmond was speechless and his gun muzzle dropped until it pointed at the floor. He looked at Swope's middle-aged, thick-fleshed features topped by thinning gray hair and saw how pain was twisting them into a hideous, unreal mask.

"What are you doin' here?" whispered Swope.

"Can't you guess?" rasped Richmond, shutting out the surge of pity that welled up beneath the overdrive of fury.

"Yeah—sure, you came to kill me," he husked.

The snow on Richmond's coat and pants and boots melted, forming a little pool of water on the floor around his feet.

"Do you blame me?" Richmond

snapped, bitterness edging his talk again. "You framed me for a crime I never committed, sent me to Devil's Acre where I spent five years of hell. You, like others in this blasted town, thought that because my father was an outlaw, I was of the same breed.

"You and all the others wouldn't believe that my father broke with the Larson gang and tried to go straight. He had a gun-duel with Larson and a bullet smashed Larson's face, paralyzing the facial muscles and ruining his good looks.

"EVEN after Dad came back here you wouldn't let him live right. You were one of his chief enemies. You hounded him constantly and whenever there was a cattle theft or a stage holdup you accused Dad of being in on it with the Larsons.

"The scorn and the hate broke Dad as much as Larson's ambushing bullets six months later—bullets that finally caused his death. But you weren't content with that. You hounded me—you and your friends—saying that there was bad blood in me and that I was not to be trusted. You made it impossible for me to get a job, to live on the range like other men."

Richmond broke off a moment, his face flushed with anger.

"What you—say—is true," admitted Swope weakly. "We had your Dad tabbed wrong."

"Yeah?. It's a helluva time to admit it after he's been buried in boothill for six years." Again Richmond paused and his voice took on a deadly, more insistent note. "You've got a killin' comin' to you, Swope, for all the misery you caused me. You hounded me until I had to get outa town. In desperation I took to prospectin'—and I found gold.

"And in the meantime you discovered that the Larson gang was still operatin' and raidin' banks and stage lines. It was rumored that you were backed to the wall and ready to go under. The government threatened to stop sendin' newly minted currency on your stages. That's when you wrote to me and said you'd learned I was going straight and offered me a chance to buy into your stageline. Like a fool I grabbed your offer, figgerin' it was a chance for me to live like other men in Western towns, liked and respected."

"I meant that offer, Russ," insisted Swope tremulously.

"You did like hell! You sent for me because you were ready to go under and needed my money. And after I'd sunk all my cash into the line, you framed me so you'd have the line all to yourself again. With all the raids on the stages you couldn't hire drivers and shotgun guards so I volunteered to tool a valuable shipment of currency.

"That shipment was kept secret. You even carried passengers to make it look like an ordinary run. But somebody tipped off Larson's gang and that somebody was you. They raided the stage and it was my tough luck to be the only one to survive. I was thrown clear of the stage. The passengers were murdered. Things went black for me and when I came to I was in town surrounded by the sheriff and a lynch-hungry mob.

"And the story went that you found me along the stage trail with some of the new currency in my pockets and an unsigned note sayin' the money was my share of the loot." Richmond's eyes narrowed and he glared balefully at Swope. "That was damned convenient, findin' me like that. You must have been workin' with the gang, arranged with 'em to leave some money on me and

then you found me. That way you were in the clear with your stage line."

"That's not true," insisted Swope, his eyes holding a haunted, desperate look. "Larson framed you but I didn't know it until four months ago when the gang robbed a bank across the state line and one of his men was wounded. Before the jasper died he implicated the gang in most of the outlawry we've had around here. In the course of his confession he mentioned that raid on my stage when you were drivin'.

"He cleared you completely—said they'd found you lying unconscious in the road and Larson decided to make it look like you'd been in on the raid. Larson hated your father and he hated you because your father ruined his looks. He wanted to kill you but he decided you'd suffer more in Devil's Acre where you'd be sent if you weren't hung. After that confession we sent word to Devil's Acre for your release but you'd already escaped."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" said Richmond with a sneer.

A shudder of weakness shook Sam Swope's body. He lay there now, staring up at Richmond out of wide, helpless eyes in which pain and exhaustion were like burning white flames.

"I—I can see you don't," he whispered. He glanced at the Colt which Richmond still gripped tightly. "All right. You'd better shoot, then. Reckon, it won't make much —difference —'cause if you don't kill me I'll die anyway — before the sawbones can get here."

Swope had to stop to regain his breath.

"Horse threw me into a pile of rubble," he resumed. "Trampled me some before Johnny could get me clear. Don't know how the younker got me on his horse and led me through the snow. Can't last long—"

Only now, with the mention of Johnny's name, did Russ Richmond remember Swope's son. The younker should be about eleven now.

"Where is Johnny?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Where did you think?" Swope countered. "He—he went for Doc Conrad." Swope stopped at Richmond's questioning glance. "You're—you're wonderin' why he didn't go for Doc Nolly. Well, Doc Nolly and I—I had some differences of opinion about you so I give my business to the new feller."

A SAVAGE gust of wind shook the walls of the room and snow pelted the window panes. The room was growing colder as the blaze in the fireplace went down. A deadly chill seized Sam Swope, making him desperately afraid.

"Kill me!" he raged. "You—you think I framed you. Well, kill me. That's—that's what—you came for. I'm slated—for boothill anyway. But Johnny—he's been gone too long—that storm—maybe he's lost—down in a drift."

"That's tough," said Richmond with a harsh laugh that somehow had a hollow, unreal ring to it.

"Richmond," gasped Swope, his voice scarcely a whisper, his eyes bugging wide in his head, "if there's any—good in you—if that prison hasn't made you a devil—go search for my younker—"

Swope's voice dropped off into an unintelligible whisper. His eyes remained open, but now they were staring sightlessly at Richmond.

Inside Russ Richmond a voice began to nag him.

"Don't go soft now, Russ. Swope is lyin' about that stage holdup, and

you can see he's dyin', so let him. It'll save you the trouble of killin' him. As for the kid, Swope was a damned fool to let the younker go out in the storm. Let him eat his heart out worryin' before he dies. Even that'll be nothin' compared to the hell you had to endure for five years."

Richmond stood immobile and uncertain, a prey to conflicting emotions. But deep within him and growing stronger by the second, was another urge. It was a force impelled by the innate decency in him—a sense of chivalry that even five years in Devil's Acre hadn't killed.

"What kind of man are you, Russ, to let Swope die without liftin' a hand to save him?" demanded this other voice. "If you do nothin' to try to help him you'll be no better than a back-shooter, and even the devil hates a back-shooter. And what about young Johnny Swope? Maybe he's lost or freezing to death in some drift. Are you goin' to leave him out in that blizzard?"

A bitter sense of frustration rolled through Russ Richmond. Slowly he shoved his gun back into the holster and strode to the door.

Swope stirred in the bed. Awareness came into his eyes. He tried to speak. His lips moved but no words came.

"You win—for now," said Richmond gruffly. "I'm goin' after Doc Ben Conrad and Johnny—if I can find him."

He turned, then, buttoned up his coat and shouldered out into the whirling snow. Out in the barn he threw a fresh blanket and saddle on the horse in the stall next to his own weary piebald and headed for the rapidly filling trail to Compton, the nearest town.

Thick, fleecy flakes pelted his cheeks like tiny needles and the wind whipped his cheeks raw and numb. The night was silent and deadly, hemmed in by a heaving white sea of snow.

Richmond traveled two miles across an area of rolling hills without uncovering any sign of Johnny's passage. Here along the open benchland and meadows the wind had pushed the snow into drifts, obliterated any tracks that might have been left by another horse.

But fifteen minutes later when the narrow trail entered a rock-walled gorge strangely free of drifts, he spotted the faint trail of a single horse. Quickly, he urged his mount forward at a faster pace. Yet, all the while he rode he had a premonition that he was already too late to help the younker.

On and on through the mile-long gorge Richmond traveled, then climbed a winding slope to a timbered ridge. Several times he lost the trail only to pick up faint traces of it yards farther on.

Time resolved itself into an endless cycle of torment. Richmond's face grew numb. The bitter cold seeped into his body, penetrating to his vitals, forcing him to hunch lower in his blanket coat.

Suddenly he jerked upright in his saddle when he saw where the trails of three other horses joined the single track he had been pursuing. There were definite signs of a struggle here., and in the midst of that muddle of prints he saw a dark stain that could only be blood. If he was right in assuming that he had been following the trail of young Johnny Swope, then at this point the button had run into trouble.

Questing about in an ever-widening circle, Richmond discovered that the prints of those three riders reversed themselves and went back in

the direction in which they had come. And now instead of three tracks there were four, which meant they'd taken Johnny along with them.

Who were those riders? What was behind the apparent struggle at this spot? And where were they taking young Johnny Swope?

These were questions Russ Richmond couldn't answer, but the consideration of them sent a hollow stirring of dread skidding along his nerves. His lips folded together in a taut, strained line and a feeling of unseen evil seemed to fill the storm-torn night.

For a long moment he debated following this new trail, but then abandoned the idea. Johnny was still alive else he'd have found the body. Besides, the trail showed plainly that four sets of prints had moved off and there was no change of depth in that fourth set of prints which would have indicated an empty saddle.

BECAUSE he felt it was more urgent that he ride to get the doctor for Sam Swope, he swung toward Compton. It was a hard decision to make, but it seemed like the only one. So long as Johnny was with other riders he had a better chance of survival in the blizzard.

Once again the long, arduous pattern of ceaseless plodding through the clinging snow went on. Richmond urged his mount on as fast as he could, conscious all the while that the horse was nearly spent and that if he collapsed, he'd be cast faoot, left to the uncertain mercy of the elements.

Time appeared to stand still, and there was no end to the monotonous procession of snow-choked trees and hills and canyons. At last, when he had begun to think he'd lost his bearings in the storm, he noticed the glimmer of Compton's lights as the white wall of flakes shifted in a gust of wind.

He rode into town, vaguely aware of activity in front of a distant livery barn where mounted men moved back and forth with lanterns. Then he turned his attention aside, remembering the urgency of his own mission here in town. A man emerged from a saloon and Richmond lifted his voice above the moan of the wind to ask directions to Doc Conrad's place. The man came close to his horse to yell an answer.

Richmond angled right at the first intersection, moved up the side street, following the townsman's directions until he came to a neat, two-room cabin sprawled on a wooded knoll.

There was no light in the cabin, but pushing past the side wall he caught the gleam of lamplight in the small barn at the rear and moved that way. He was at the barn's entrance before the tall, slender man, who was saddling up a big-chested roan was aware of his presence. The man swung around and his hand swept inside his coat to come out with a long-barreled Colt.

"Who's that?" came the harsh query.

Richmond placed his hands well in front of him, but kept on until his face was clearly etched in yellow lamplight.

"Doc Conrad?" he asked tersely.

"Yeah," came the crisp answer. "Who are you? Keep your hands on the saddle horn."

"Kinda proddy for a sawbones, ain't you?" Richmond observed.

In the lamplight he studied the medico's dark-skinned, handsome face, the bushy brows and narrowed, suspicious eyes.

"Mebbe," was Conrad's answer. He was wary and he kept his gun trained on Richmond. There was no trust in

his eyes and none in his manner. "A man can't take chances in this town."

"Sam Swope sent me," said Richmond. "He was thrown from his horse and trampled. Young Johnny started out for you but somethin' happened to keep him from comin'."

"What happened?"

Briefly Richmond told Conrad what he had found along the trail, letting the medico draw his own conclusions.

"Somethin' funy goin' on here." Conrad broke off and his gun was still in his hand. "How do I know you're telin' the truth? I don't even kno who you are. You're a stranger to me."

"The name is Russ Richmond and if I know sick men, Sam Swope is dyin'. You'd better get a move on."

Watching Conrad with a strict and unrelenting attention, Richmond saw a slight flicker of aroused interest in the doctor's eyes, then his features turned stiff and unreadable again.

There was a sudden feeling of strain here that was intensified by the eerie howling of the wind. The frail walls of the barn shook and trembled as snow piled up against them, and the air seemed to have a rawer, bitter edge to it. Now Conrad holstered his gun and swung aboard his horse.

"All right," he said. "I'll take your word for it, but you'll ride along with me. I was headed out to see another patient, but I reckon this is more important. Help yourself to a fresh horse."

Richmond nodded curtly and dismounted, throwing his rig onto another animal which he found in the barn. Out in the street once more and heading past the main intersection, Richmond faced Conrad and gestured toward the livery barn where a group of men still gathered.

"Why all the activity in this blizzard?"

Conrad gave him a shrewd, suspicious look before he answered.

"Outlaws looted the Compton bank tonight and killed the night watchman. They got away with twenty thousand in cash. The sheriff thinks it's the Larson gang. A posse just came back from scourin' the hills but they had no luck in the blizzard."

At the mention of Larson, Russ Richmond felt rage shimmer up through his body in a series of steady vibrations. His lip corners twisted in bleak, bitter curves and he thought of his father, Jack Richmond, and of the black years the elder Richmond had spent with Larson.

Russ Richmond was abruptly remembering the stories of Larson's brutality, remembering that Larson had tried to keep his father from going straight and had later drygulched him, leaving Jack Richmond a crippled man—the object of scorn for men who called that shooting a falling-out among renegades and exhibited it as proof that Jack Richmond had never broken with the gang.

"I thought the Larsons were operatin' across the state line," Richmond said quietly, trying to keep his voice under control.

"They were until four months ago." Conrad looked closely at him again, then added: "When you came up to me before I didn't know who you were. You might've been one of the Larson bunch."

Richmond nodded but said nothing. Afterward the two men rode in silence, heading for the hills, shouldering into the teeth of the gale that whipped down from the high peaks. The going grew steadily more difficult. Several times the horses floundered in deep drifts and Richmond and Conrad had to fling themselves

into the hip-deep snow and haul the animals out, breaking a fresh trail with their own bodies.

AT times the trail was completely blotted out in a grayish-white smother and they traveled blindly, trustint to the instincts of the horses. Slowly but inexorably Richmond felt his senses freeze up, dulled by the biting rawness of the night.

It was during one of these moments when he lingered in a state of half-awareness, that Richmond felt Conrad's horse slam against him. He glanced up, peering through the screen of snow.

He had a faint glimpse of Conrad's face, twisted and brutal with dark purpose, shoving close to him. Then he saw the gun glinting in the medico's fist.

"All right, sucker!" shouted Conrad above the roar of the storm. "This is the end of the trail for you."

Desperately Richmond lunged at Conrad, his right arm swinging in a stiff arc. But his fist never connected. Conrad's gun barrel chopped down through his guard and crashed against his skull.

Richmond's knees lost their grip, and he pitched suddenly from the kak. Darkness started to close in over his mind and he was only dimly aware of Conrad's voice murmuring against the storm's onslaught.

"So you're Russ Richmond! Wouldn't Larson be glad to see you. But there ain't time. I'm late now and Larson will be waitin'."

That was all Richmond heard. He fought to retain consciousness while Conrad picked him up and carried him a short distance. Suddenly, then, he was flung down. The edge of a precipice smashed his shoulder blades and his body careened into space.

Down and down a steep slope he

(Continued On Page 86)

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(Continued From Page 85)

plummeted in a headlong, rolling fall while blackness clamped a tight lid upon his mind. . . .

Pain that throbbed through him in hammering waves brought Richmond back to awareness. His head seemed to be exploding and there was a solid roaring in his ears. But through all those sensations persisted a biting, penetrating cold.

He lay in a huge drift of snow. More flakes were drifting down out of the sky. He flung out an arm, felt a surge of hollow dread when his splayed fingers clawed empty space.

Gingerly he moved his body, struggled to his hands and knees in the drift that held him. Then he saw that he was on a narrow ledge which jutted out from the rock wall of a canyon. To his left was nothing but empty space—a huge abyss lost in swirling snow.

Somehow in his wild tumble from the rimrock above, his body had landed on the ledge and had been wedged against the wall. Looking up toward the rim, Richmond had his bleak moment in which to wonder if it might not have been better if he had plunged all the way down to the bottom of the gorge. Trapped here on the ledge, a prey to the frigid gale, the steady sweep of icy snow, death would be only a matter of an hour or two.

Despair laid a dark and heavy hand upon Richmond's mind. Then he thrust it aside and anger had its way with him as he remembered Doc Conrad's words.

Conrad had revealed enough to show that he not only knew Larson, but was working with the gang. His suspicious actions in town at his, Richmond's, appearance, were now explained. And his attempt to kill him

was proof that some evil pattern was building here.

The Larson gang was still somewhere in the vicinity. They might be the riders who had intercepted young Johnny Swope. And somewhere they would be waiting to meet Doc Conrad. Because he knew now that Swope could expect no help from the crooked sawbones, because he knew Johnny Swope was in real danger if he had fallen into the hands of the Larson gang, because somehow he had to bring medical aid to the elder Swope, Russ Richmond knew that he had to make a supreme bid to get out of this blizzard death trap.

Questing with frozen fingers along the ragged expanse of the canyon wall, he found several crevices where a hand or foot might find precarious purchase. Above, he could see a few straggling bushes which had somehow managed to eke out an existence in the bare rock.

Working swiftly and desperately because he knew this was a grim race against time, Richmond leaped up and found a handhold in one crevice, then laboriously pulled his body up. From crevice to crevice he moved. It was slow, soul-searing work with one slip meaning instant disaster.

SNOW kept drilling down, and the wind moaned through the gorge. It buffeted him, tried to shake him loose from the wall. The narrow ledges were slippery under his fingers. Several times he felt himself losing his gold, but each time he managed to save himself.

Up and up he went until he gained the first slender bit of scrub brush. He rested there for long minutes while his agonized breathing threatened to tear out his lungs. For one thing he was thankful. His tre-

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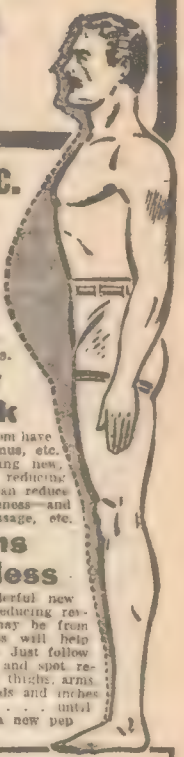

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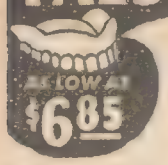

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Western Yarns

(Continued From Page 87)

mendous efforts were bringing some warmth back to his chilled body.

After five minutes he moved on. When he gained the top he was spent and weary. He fell face-down in the snow and for a long minute he lay there, conscious of an overpowering lassitude that had come over his body. Suddenly he shook himself. He had to go on. But where?

From now on he was afoot in a raging blizzard. The chances were a hundred to one against him that he'd ever come out of this alive, that he'd last long enough to ever tangle with Conrad again or with Larson, or even reach shelter.

He saw the clearly defined trail left by Conrad as well as that of his own horse which the medico was evidently leading. Grimly Richmond ignored that sign and plunged off in a direction which was diagonaly opposite. It would be foolish to follow Conrad. There was no telling how far the crooked sawbones was going to meet Larson. What was more important was reaching shelter and getting aid for Sam Swope. After he had done that, he could think about those other things—about young Johnny and Conrad and Larson.

He remembered now that somewhere in this wild region old Doc Nolly, the medico who had brought him into the world, lived alone in his small cabin. He wasn't sure if he could find it in this blizzard but he meant to have a try at it.

Slipping and stumbling through the snow, Russ Richmond moved doggedly forward. After twenty minutes he felt his strength ebbing fast. The cold raw edge of the gale was getting to him, freezing his insides. He reeled on like a drunken man, swaying and staggering from side to side.

Several times he fell into deep drifts, and each time it required more effort to climb to his feet, more will power to fight the growing dullness that surged through his muscles.

Minutes passed slowly, interminably, and still that thick screen of snow enclosed him, wrapping him in a cold, blighting smother.

He stumbled again, plunged into waist-deep snow. He lay there, his breathing faint and shallow. Somehow he rolled over, peered ahead. His heart leaped. In a rift in the snow he saw a flicker of light. There was a cabin ahead.

With a last desperate surge of strength, he pulled himself up and crawled toward that strengthening gleam. Reaching the cabin, he fell against the door, his stiffened hands pummeling the panels before he collapsed.

A hot, burning sensation sweeping down his gullet, awakening a feverish glow in his belly, brought Russ Richmond around. His eyes blinked open. He was inside the cabin, lying on the floor, and Doc Nolly was pressing more liquor down his throat.

"Russ, what are you doin' here—out in that blizzard?" demanded the sawbones. "Little longer and you'd have been done in."

Richmond smiled bleakly. There was no humor in the gesture for the last five years had robbed this man of his laughter, leaving him tough and saturnine. Now he looked at the genial man in front of him and felt a surge of warmth at sight of his solid, square-hewn body, his kindly gray eyes, the stringy and yellowed eyebrows.

"Last I heard of you," said Nolly when Richmond said nothing, "was that you'd escaped from Devil's Acre. What are you—?"

"I came back to kill Sam Swope," broke in Richmond tersely, "but now I've got more important things to do." He halted and tried to sit up, pushing the sawbones away. "Doc, we've got to travel fast," he blurted, rising shakily to his feet while Nolly rubbed his hands and face with wet

(Continued On Page 90)

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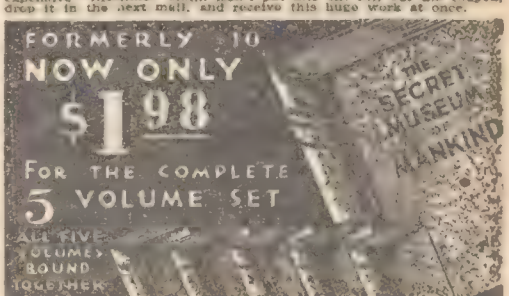

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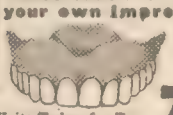

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(Continued From Page 89)

snow to restore numbed circulation. "I found Swope smashed up by a fall from a horse. He was dyin'—looked like. Young Johnny went for Doc Conrad. I went after the younker, found where he'd had a ruckus with some riders. I figger it may be Larson's gang, for they gutted the bank in town."

"Larson back here?" demanded Nolly. "What'd that gang want with Johnny?"

"I don't know," said Richmond impatiently.

"But what happened to you?"

Swiftly Richmond went on to relate how Conrad had tried to kill him, how he had escaped and come here to bring Doc Nolly to Swope.

"Conrad is in with Larson's bunch," concluded Richmond. "He proved that. With this storm the gang won't be able to get out of the country. I'd like to meet that bunch, but first you've got to ride to Swope with me."

Nolly nodded, his genial face taking on a look of worried concern. He moved to a corner of the room for his bag.

"All right, Russ. I'm a doctor. I'll have to go though Swope has had no use for me since he's been givin' Conrad his business. As for Conrad I never did trust him since he came here three-four months ago. He always seemed to have money and made friends with all the big men in town including Ed Seavey, the banker; the owners of the stage line.

"NOW that I think of it, things had been kind of quiet in Compton for a long time. But shortly after Conrad arrived we had a new outbreak in outlawry. I reckon Conrad's the answer. He got the inside information for the gang, and Larson and the rest did the work."

There was an abrupt, dark brilliance in Russ Richmond's eyes. Now he moved uncertainly to Nolly and grabbed his arms.

"One thing I've got to know, Doc. Swope told me tonight that one of Larson's bunch

cleared me of that stage holdup several months ago."

"That's the truth, Russ," said Nolly quietly. His eyes roved over Richmond's stalwart figure. He saw the hard determination in the man, the bleakness in his eyes, saw the toll one night in the blizzard had taken. "Swope had nothin' to do with framin' you. It was Larson. And when Swope found you with that money he figured like everyone else that you had the owlhoot streak in you. I know he tried to get in touch with you after he found out. You're in the clear and there's no law on your trail."

Richmond's shoulders stirred restlessly. Tiny grim lines were etched in his weary pain-wracked face. He had reached the end of his endurance, and at this moment tolerance and mercy were no longr his virtues.

"That's all I wanted to know," he murmured in a flat-toned voice. "I came back to kill Swope, but if I have half a chance I'll stay long enough to kill Conrad and Larson. Mebbe it's too late, but we'll see—after we get to Swope's."

A worried frown puckered Nolly's face.

"You stay here, Russ. You're in no condition to travel."

Richmond's body cut a stiff, resolute shape in front of the medico and his eyes flashed with a sudden, bright heat.

"Don't try to stop me," was all he said as he moved toward the door and flung it open to let in a blast of cold and snow.

Doc Nolly shrugged and followed Richmond outside to the barn. Ten minutes later they were plodding through the blizzard, heads down, bucking the incessant lash of needling flakes. Neither man spoke. Every bit of energy was needed for the effort of travel. The going was even tougher than it had been before. By dawn all the high mountain passes would be blocked by impassable walls of snow.

At last, they sighted the sprawling Swope house. Richmond immediately reached out

(Continued On Page 92)

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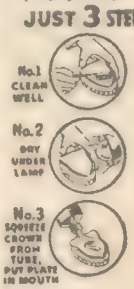

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(Continued From Page 91)

to lay a restraining hand upon the medico's arm.

"We'll circle to the rear before goin' in," he said. "I've got a feelin' we're runnin' into trouble."

They made a wide detour about the house and came up to the barn. Within the warm interior they saw four unsaddled mounts. All of them were wet and warm from being recently ridden in the storm.

"Looks like Swope has unexpected company," murmured Richmond, the hackles along the nape of his neck beginning to rise.

"Who could it be?" Nolly queried uncertainly.

"It could be part of the posse huntin' the Larson bunch—or it might be the Larson crew themselves," said Richmond. "My guess is the Larsons. Come on."

Emerging from the barn, they went to the side window of the front room. Through a crack at the bottom of the drawn blind they got a view of the interior. Richmond drew in a deep breath when he saw Harry Larson seated at a table with Doc Conrad.

"There's Larson!" he exclaimed, blood pumping into his head, his muscles going taut.

Larson was a hideous caricature of a man. A long red scar traversed the length of his left cheek which was strangely loose and flaccid. The skin was distorted and without any muscular flex, making his face horribly lop-sided.

"They've got young Johnny!" gasped Nolly.

Richmond nodded, letting his glance slide around the room. He saw the button sprawled limply in a chair, crude bloody bandage about his head, cowering in front of a hard-faced outlaw. Another outlaw guarded Sam Swope who was somehow miraculously alive and trying to sit up. Between Larson and Conrad on the table was a big leather sack and some currency which had evidently been taken from an old-fash-

ioned safe whose ponderous door had been broken open.

"The odds are tough," said Nolly in a half-frightened whisper. "They're two to one against us and they're all handy with hoglegs."

Richmond snorted and there was a brittle, reckless challenge in the way his tall body stiffened.

"It could be ten to one and I'd still have a go at the skunks. Whatever happens now will be for old Jack Richmond."

Turning away from the window, Richmond grabbed Nolly and hustled him back toward the barn.

"Where are we going?" queried Nolly, bewildered.

"I've hit upon a plan to even the odds," came Richmond's terse reply. "We'll bring the horses around to the front door. We'll shove open the door and follow them in. In the confusion the breaks ought to be about even. Leave most of the shootin' to me. You try to keep Swope from gettin' hit and watch the younker."

Quickly they led the reluctant animals out into the night again and around to the porch.

Richmond's fingers were cold as he drew his gun and he didn't know how well he'd be able to shoot. But it was a chance he had to take.

"Here we go!" he gritted and shoved the door open, at the same time slapping the horses on their rumps, chasing them inside.

Crouched low, guns jutting from their fists, Richmond and Nolly charged into the room behind their stampeding horses. Larson and Conrad half-rose from the table, shock rolling solidly through them.

"Damn you, Conrad!" yelled Larson. "You said you killed Richmond!"

THE outlaw leader went for his holstered gun. But even as he did so the bolting horses struck the table at which he had been seated and upended it. Larson and Conrad were hurled to the floor.

(Continued On Page 94)

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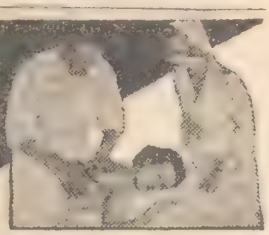

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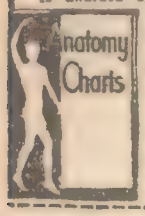

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(Continued From Page 93)

The renegade posted near Swope's bed twisted around with an angry snarl furling his lips. His gun leaped into his fist, cutting a red swathe toward Doc Nolly. But the bullet went wild and the medico halted on wide legs to pump two shots into the outlaw's middle.

The renegade's flailing hands clawed at his bullet-riddled belly as he plunged to the floor. Then Nolly was scrambling to the bed, dragging Sam Swope to the puncheons out of the line of gunfire.

Rolling over and over across the floor, Larson and Conrad tried to escape Nolly's frightened, bolting horse. Conrad fired wildly at Richmond, the bullet ripping plaster from the wall. Then Nolly's horse reared high and came charging back toward Richmond. Powerful equine shoulders struck Richmond and knocked him to his knees. A bullet from Larson's down-chopping Colt kicked up splinters in his face as he rolled.

Richmond saw Conrad readying himself for another shot and hauled himself up on one elbow, speeding the hammer upon two squalling explosions. Red fire leaped from the round black bore of his gun, then Conrad was sagging like a slit sack of meal, falling face-forward with an expression of gray dismay oiling his features.

At the same moment that Richmond was downing Conrad, young Johnny Swope vaulted across the room to grab Richmond's horse. He caught the reins while the renegade who had been near him cut loose at the crouched Nolly with a blast of lead.

The shots droned over the medico's head. Nolly returned the fire but his shots went wild. The outlaw darted to one side, fired again, then tripped over a splintered chair. He rolled frantically as Richmond's horse, still on the loose, bolted toward him.

Another smaller table upended with a crash. Then the horse was upon the renegade, flailing hoofs slamming into the man's chest, crushing the life out of him.

Russ Richmond saw all that in a fleeting

moment of time before he whirled to meet Larson's furious charge. Muzzle flame hosed from the outlaw's Colt. Something like a hot branding iron was laid across Richmond's shoulder and he dropped his gun.

It fell on the puncheons in front of him. He got to his knees and in that position looked up at the sound of Larson's wicked chuckle.

"Boothill's waitin' for you, friend!" rasped Larson. His lopsided, distorted face was more hideous with rage and murder lust than it had ever been. He saw how Richmond's eyes clung to his face. "Yeah, look at me, damn you! I ain't pretty. Your old man did that to me and I killed him for it. You're a Richmond and I'm killin' you."

Across the room Doc Nolly uttered a strangled cry and squeezed the trigger of his weapon. But the hammer fell on an empty cylinder. Then Larson fired. Desperately Richmond moved with the shot, launching himself along the floor, his fingers questing for the Colt he had dropped.

A bullet burned his ribs. Then his hand closed on the haft of the gun. Somehow, despite the pain in his shoulder and side, the aching weariness that dragged at all his muscles, he willed his arm to lift the gun, forced the hammer down on another shot.

Larson folded at the hips. A tiny spot of crimson appeared on his shirt and it spread rapidly. He uttered one shrill curse and collapsed.

LAMPLIGHT flickered dully in the wrecked front room. The bodies of the slain outlaws had been removed. Blood still stained the floor. A long hour of tense waiting had passed. Now Doc Nolly turned wearily from the white-sheeted bed where Sam Swope lay and faced Richmond.

"Three of Swope's ribs are smashed and there was some internal bleeding, but he'll pull through," murmured Nolly, putting his medical instruments back in the bag. "Now I'll look at your wounds."

(Continued On Page 97)

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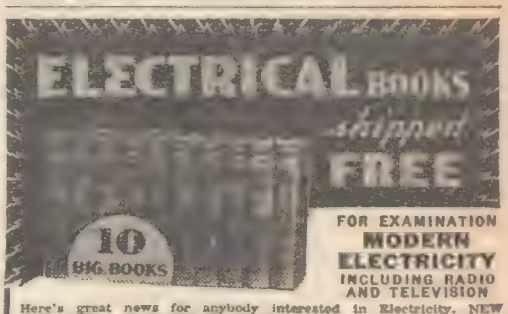

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Fugitive From Hell

(Continued From Page 95)

Richmond strode uncertainly toward the bed. He saw Swope's eyes flip open. The man had been through something. His breathing was shallow and he was terribly pale. He managed a weak grin.

"Thanks—Russ!" he whispered. "If—if it hadn't been for you—I'd have been done for. Larson—and his bunch—were fixin' to hole up here until the storm broke then beat it—takin' Johnny as a hostage. They—they busted my safe, knowin' that since the recent outbreak in outlawry I'd been keepin' my money here. They were gonna make one—one big sweep."

Some of the bleakness had gone out of Richmond's features.

"Sorry about wantin' to kill you," he muttered, strangely ill at ease. "That was a mistake. But we cleaned up the Larsons. Reckon I'll be leavin' this neck o' the country now."

"You can't go anywhere in this storm," protested Nolly. "Besides, where would you go?" The doctor turned to Swope. "And you'd better not do any more talkin'. I'll give you somethin' to make you sleep."

"Wait!" husked Swope. His lips moved with an effort and his eyes clung to Richmond. "Did you forget you—invested money—in my stageline five years ago? We're still partners—and with the Larson gang wiped out mebbe we could build up the business."

There was a half-desperate appeal in Swope's eyes. Watching him, Richmond discerned in that glance an infinite remorse for his misjudgment of Richmond, and for the living hell that had been Richmond's lot for five long years. If ever a man had his black regrets, it was Sam Swope.

Russ Richmond saw all that and suddenly the old bitterness washed out of him. The weight of rage and fury dropped from him like a cloak and he found that he could smile again.

"Yeah—that's right," he murmured. "We are partners. Reckon somebody's gotta run that stageline till you're on your feet. No reason why it shouldn't be me."

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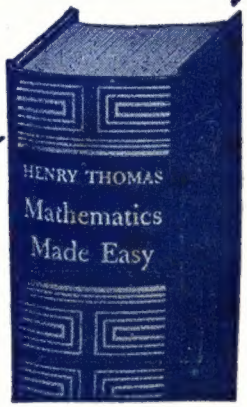

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